PREFACE

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT HOW RONALD REAGAN CAME WITHIN A HAIRSbreadth of becoming the 1976 Republican nominee for president. But it is also about much more. In the years between 1973 and 1976, America suffered more wounds to its ideal of itself than at just about any other time in its history. First in January 1973, when Richard Nixon declared America's role in the Vietnam War over after some eight years (if you count it from the first major air strikes and Marine landings in 1965) or nine years (if you count it from the congressional authorization that followed the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964) or twelve years (if you count the first major infusion of fifteen thousand U.S. military "advisors" in 1961) of fighting. Some 58,000 Americans dead, $699 billion expended in American treasure: Nixon called this "peace with honor," but that just obscured the fact that America had lost its first war. Then, almost immediately, televised hearings on the complex of presidential abuses known as Watergate revealed the men entrusted with the White House as little better, or possibly worse, than common criminals, in what a senator called "a national funeral that just goes on day after day." Then in October came the Arab oil embargo—and suddenly Americans learned overnight that the commodity that underpinned their lifestyle was vulnerable to "shocks," and the world's mightiest economy could be held hostage by some mysterious cabal of Third World sheikhs.

This list omits a dozen smaller traumas in between. (One of my favorites, lost to everyday historical memory, was the near doubling of meat prices in the spring of 1973, when the president's consumer advisor went on TV and informed viewers that "liver, kidney, brains, and heart can be made into gourmet meals with seasoning, imagination, and more cooking time.") In the next few years the traumas continued, compounding: The end of a presidency, accompanied by fears Richard Nixon might seek to hold on to his office by force of arms. Inflation such as America had never known during peacetime. A recession that saw hundreds of thousands of blue-collar workers idled during Christmastime; crime at a volume and ghastliness greater, according to one observer, "than at any time since the fifteenth century." Senate and House hearings on the Central Intelligence Agency that accused American presidents since Dwight Eisenhower of commanding squads of lawless assassins.

With these traumas emerged a new sort of American politics—a stark discourse of reckoning. What kind of nation were we to suffer such humiliations, so suddenly, so unceasingly, so unexpectedly? A few pages hence, you will read these words from one expert: "For the first time, Americans have had at least a partial loss in the fundamental belief in ourselves. We've always believed we were the new men, the new people, the new society. The 'last best hope on earth,' in Lincoln's terms. For the first time, we've really begun to doubt it." And that was only February 1973. By 1976, a presidential year, such observations would become so routine that when the nation geared up for a massive celebration of its Bicentennial, it was common for editorialists and columnists to question whether America deserved to hold a birthday party at all—and whether the party could come off without massive bloodshed, given that there had been eighty-nine bombings attributed to terrorism in 1975. The liberals at the *New Republic* reflected upon the occasion of the most harrowing 1975 trauma—the military collapse of our ally South Vietnam, the nation on behalf of which we had expended those thousands of lives and billions of dollars—that "[i]f the Bicentennial helps us focus on the contrast between our idealism and our crimes, so much the better."

The most ambitious politicians endeavored to speak to this new national mood. An entire class of them—"Watergate babies"—were swept into Congress in 1975, pledging thoroughgoing reform of America's broken institutions. And nearly alone among ambitious politicians, Ronald Reagan took a different road.

RETURNING TO THE NATION'S ATTENTION TOWARD THE END OF HIS SECOND term as California governor, as pundits began speculating about which Republican might succeed Richard Nixon (and then which ones might succeed his replacement, Gerald Ford), Reagan, whenever he was asked about Watergate, insisted it said nothing important about the American character at all. Asked about Vietnam, he'd say the only dishonor was that America had not expended *enough* violence—that "the greatest immorality is to ask young men to fight or die for my country if it's not a cause we are willing to win." One of the quotes he liked to repeat in those years came from Pope Pius XII, writing in *Collier's* magazine in 1945, when the United States was on top of the world: "The American people have a genius for great and unselfish deeds. Into the hands of America, God has placed the destiny of an afflicted mankind."

When Reagan began getting attention for talking this way, in America's season of melancholy, Washington's touts cited him only to dismiss him. No one who called the Watergate burglars "well-meaning individuals committed to the reelection of the President . . . not criminals at heart," as Reagan had in the spring of 1973, could be taken seriously as a political comer. But a central theme of my previous two books chronicling conservatism's ascendency in American politics has been the myopia of pundits, who so frequently fail to notice the very cultural ground shifting beneath their feet. In fact, at every turn in America's reckoning with its apparent decline, there were always dissenting voices.

They said things like: Richard Nixon just *couldn't* be a bad guy. And that America just *couldn't* be surrendering its role as God's chosen nation: not possible. At first such voices sounded mainly in the interstices of America's political discourse—in letters to the editor; among right-wing institution builders whose industriousness exploiting the cultural confusions of the 1970s was being largely ignored by the guardians of polite opinion; in conservative churches whose pews grew more crowded even as experts insisted religious belief was in radical decline. ("Christians must accept being a definite minority for the time being," one professor told a reporter for a widely republished wire story in 1976.) But these voices were moving from the margins to the center.

This was related to what Ronald Reagan was accomplishing politically. But things shifted independently of him, too. "Nation's Hunger to Feel Good Erupts in Fever of Patriotism," ran one wire service headline about the Bicentennial celebration on July 4, 1976. The keynote of articles like this, which were common, was *surprise*—surprise that it wasn't so hard to unapologetically celebrate America, after all. "The feeling of the day sort of crept up on many of us, took us by surprise," as Elizabeth Drew, Washington's most sure-footed chronicler of the passing political scene and certainly no conservative herself, wrote in her own article about that special day. "There was a spirit to it that could not have been anticipated. For those of us who had been in despair about this Bicentennial Fourth of July, who feared the worst, the surprise was a very pleasing one."

This book is about how that shift in national sentiment took place.

THIS BOOK IS ALSO A SORT OF BIOGRAPHY OF RONALD REAGAN—OF RONald Reagan, rescuer. He had been a sullen little kid from a chaotic, alcoholic home, whose mother's passion for saving fallen souls could never save her own husband. It also seemed to have kept her out of the house almost constantly. But by the time of Ronald Reagan's adolescence, the boy who told his friends to call him “Dutch” had cultivated an extraordinary gift in the act of rescuing himself: the ability to radiate blithe optimism in the face of what others called chaos—to reimagine the morass in front of him as a tableau of simple moral clarity. He did the same thing as a politician: skillfully reframing situations that those of a more critical temper saw as irresolvable muddles (like, say, the Vietnam War) as crystalline black-or-white melodramas. This was a key to what made others feel so good in his presence, what made them so eager and willing to follow him—what made him a leader.

But it was why, simultaneously, he was such a *controversial* leader. Others witnessing precisely this quality saw him as a phony and a hustler. In this book, Ronald Reagan is not a uniter. He is in essence a divider. And understanding the precise *ways* that opinions about him divided Americans—as in my earlier book that focused on the national divisions revolving around Richard Nixon—better helps us understand our political order of battle today: how Americans divide themselves from each other.

The pattern emerged extraordinarily early. In 1966, when Reagan, the TV host and former actor in B movies, shocked the political universe by winning the Republican nomination for California governor, a young aspiring journalist named Ralph Keyes began researching a profile of him (it never got published). Industriously, Keyes tracked down acquaintances who had attended tiny Eureka College in central Illinois with Reagan, or taught him there, between 1928 and 1932. The divergent recollections of Reagan map precisely onto how they would sound if you corralled a random sample of politically attuned citizens today. Half remembered him as a hero, a figure of destiny:

> *“Always articulate, always had an idea, always moving, always had a program, always with action and words. My sister is a classmate of his and what she and others thought was that he had a future.”*
>
> *“He was a respected leader of campus life. He was a first-class gentleman... a conscientious, dedicated fellow. He was always committed to principles and big ideals.”*

And half judged him precisely the opposite, shallow at best, a manipulative fraud at worst:

> *“Dutch was the cautious big man on a small campus. He'd run a mile to avoid a controversy... if this is governor of California material I don't know what I am.... Very immature, strictly rah-rah... He was a very personable guy but I never felt he was really a human being, that he ever did anything spontaneously.”*
>
> “[*A*] *whale of a good cheerleader... Reagan made his biggest impression on me in leading yells.”*
>
> *“Ronald Reagan was a man who was spending a great deal of time impressing the populace with little evidence of depth.... I don't think he is intelligent enough to be cynical.”*

Before Reagan had served a single day in any political office, a polarity of opinion was set—and it endured forevermore. On one side: those who saw him as the rescuer, hero, redeemer. Read a handwritten get-well note he received after the 1981 assassination attempt against him. It referred to his first job, as a youthful lifeguard: “I met you in the 20s in Lowell Park, Illinois. Do you remember the good times we had in the 20s. You were 17 years old then and everyone called you Duch [*sic*]. Please get well soon. We need you to save this country—remember all the lives you saved in Lowell Park.” The letter appears in a religious biography of Reagan that argues that his coming into the world, culminating with his single-handed defeat of the Soviet empire, was literally providential, the working out of God's plan.

On the other side: those who found Reagan a phony, a fraud, or a toady. The first time such an opinion of Reagan shows up in the historical record is in his high school yearbook. He's depicted fishing a suicide out of the water, who begs, “Don't rescue me. I want to die.” Reagan responds, “Well, you'll have to postpone that: I want a medal.” Like the Reagan-worship, the Reagan-hate lives on. I think of a friend who grew up in California in the 1960s and '70s. I'd wanted to share this manuscript with her, thinking it would benefit from her brilliance. She told me that I'd best not send it; she couldn't think straight about Reagan for her rage. Her beef, and that of millions of others, was simple: that all that turbulence in the 1960s and '70s had given the nation a chance to finally reflect critically on its power, to shed its arrogance, to become a more humble and better citizen of the world—to *grow up*—but Reagan's rise nipped that imperative in the bud. Immanuel Kant defined the Enlightenment, the sweeping eighteenth-century intellectual-cum-political movement that saw all settled conceptions of society thrown up in the air, which introduced radical new notions of liberty and dignity, dethroned God, and made human reason the new measure of moral worth—a little like the 1960s and '70s—as "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." For these citizens what Reagan achieved foreclosed that imperative: that Americans might learn to question leaders ruthlessly, throw aside the silly notion that American power was always innocent, and think like grown-ups. They had been proposing a new definition of patriotism, one built upon questioning authority and unsettling ossified norms. Then along came Ronald Reagan, encouraging citizens to think like children, waiting for a man on horseback to rescue them: a tragedy.

The division was there even among his own offspring. Maureen, for instance, his eldest, who became a Republican activist, wrote of the time her father as governor missed one more in a train of important milestones in her life (he was away representing President Nixon at an international meeting in Denmark). She cast it in the most optimistic possible way: "I think dad always regretted times like these, at least a little bit, the way the tug and pull of his public life kept him from enjoying firsthand the successes of his children. Oh, he enjoyed them with us in spirit, and he was always there for us emotionally." She wrote in a similar way of both her and her brother Michael missing their father's wedding to his second wife because they were both stashed away by their self-absorbed parents at boarding schools: it was for the best—"because my folks wanted only the smallest of ceremonies." She was her father's daughter. In this book you will read how Ronald Reagan framed even the most traumatic events in his life—even his father's funeral—as always working out gloriously in the end, evidence that the universe was just.

At the other pole there was his other daughter, Patti, a rock-and-rolling liberal. She wrote, "I had been taught to keep secrets, to keep our image intact for the world.... Under our family's definition of 'loyalty,' the public should never see that under a carefully preserved surface was a group of people who knew how to inflict wounds, and then convincingly say those wounds never existed." She wrote of how her mother, Nancy, beat her, was addicted to pills, and used their house's state-of-the-art intercom system (installed by General Electric, their corporate benefactor) as a tool for Orwellian surveillance. (Maureen described that same intercom system as a providential gift, writing of the time it broadcast the sound of little Ron, the youngest, crashing to the floor in the nursery, allowing them to save his life.)

Call Maureen's version "denial"—liberals are always accusing conservatives of a politics of being in denial. Call Patti a cynic, always seeing everything in a negative light—and God knows conservatives are

always accusing liberals of doing *that.* Optimism, pessimism; America the innocent, America the compromised: these incommensurate polarities have come to be part of the very structure of the left-versus-right order of battle in American political life—as much as the debate over the role of government led by Barry Goldwater that I described in my first book, *Before the Storm;* and the culture war between mutually recriminating cultural sophisticates on the one hand and the plain, earnest "Silent Majority" on the other that I wrote about my second, *Nixonland.*

NOTE WELL, THOUGH, THAT REAGAN'S SIDE IN THIS BATTLE OF POLITICAL affect, which is carried out far above the everyday minutiae of policy debates and electoral tallies, has prevailed. Listen to Liz Cheney in 2009, speaking for Republican multitudes: "I believe unequivocally, unapologetically, America is the best nation that ever existed in history, and clearly that exists today." And here is Mitt Romney, accepting the Republican nomination in 2012, speaking of the day he watched Neil Armstrong land on the moon: "Like all Americans we went to bed that night knowing we lived in the greatest country in the world." He'd been saying the same sort of thing on the campaign trail all year, in nearly every speech: a Google search for "Mitt Romney" and "greatest nation in the history of the earth" just yielded me 114,000 hits.

Such utterances, of course, are meant to be an ideological reproach to Democrats, supposedly always "apologizing for America." As if. Here was San Antonio mayor Julian Castro's keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2012: "Ours is a nation like no other.... No matter who you are or where you come from, the path is always forward." The first lady, Michelle Obama, spoke of her campaign journeys to meet Americans around the country: "Every day they make me proud. Every day they remind me how blessed we are to live in the greatest nation on earth." Then her husband, accepting the Democratic nomination: "We keep our eyes fixed on that distant horizon knowing that Providence is with us and that we are surely blessed to be citizens of the greatest nation on earth." And here is Samantha Power, the president's choice as ambassador to the United Nations, at her confirmation hearings, early in 2013, questioned about a magazine article she published a decade earlier in which she wrote that American foreign policy needed "a historical reckoning with crimes committed, sponsored, or permitted by the United States." Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, demanded to know what crimes she was referring to. She would only respond, "America is the greatest country in the world and we have nothing to apologize for."

This is a book about how such rhetoric came into being, and how such hubris comes now to define us. In certain ways we live in some of the darkest times in our history: global warming threatens to engulf us; political polarization threatens to paralyze us; the economy nearly collapsed because of the failure of the banking regulatory regime; competition from China threatens to overwhelm us; social mobility is at its lowest point in generations—to name only a few versions of the national apocalypse that may yet come. But at the same time, somehow, something almost like a cult of official optimism—*the greatest nation in the history of the earth*—saturates the land. How did it happen? That is one of the questions *The Invisible Bridge* poses.

Here is another: What does it mean to *truly* believe in America? To wave a flag? Or to struggle toward a more searching alternative to the shallowness of the flag-wavers—to criticize, to interrogate, to analyze, to *dissent*? During the years covered in these pages Americans debated that question with an intensity unmatched before or since—even if they didn't always know that this was what they were doing. I hope this volume might become a spur to renewing that debate in *these* years—a time that cries for reckoning once more, in a nation that has ever so adored its own innocence, and so dearly wishes to see itself as an exception to history.

CHAPTER ONE

"Small and Suspicious Circles"

ONCE UPON A TIME WE HAD A CIVIL WAR. MORE THAN SIX HUNDRED thousand Americans were slaughtered or wounded. Soon afterward, the two sides began carrying out sentimental rituals of reconciliation. Confederate soldiers paraded through the streets of Boston to the cheers of welcoming Yankee throngs, and John Quincy Adams II, orating from the podium, said, "You are come so that once more we may pledge ourselves to a new union, not a union merely of law, or simply of the lips: not . . . of the sword, but gentlemen, the only true union, the union of hearts." Dissenters from the new postbellum comity—like the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who argued that the new system of agricultural labor taking root in the South and enforced by Ku Klux Klan terror hardly differed from slavery—were shouted down. "Does he really imagine," the *New York Times* indignantly asked, "that outside of small and suspicious circles any real interest attaches to the old forms of the Southern question?"

America the Innocent, always searching for totems of a unity it can never quite achieve—even, or especially, when its crises of disunity are most pressing: it is one of the structuring stories of our nation. The "return to normalcy" enjoined by Warren Harding after the Great War; the cult of suburban home and hearth after World War II; the union of hearts declaimed by Adams on Boston's Bunker Hill parade ground after the War Between the States.

And in 1973, after ten or so years of war in Vietnam, America tried to do it again.

On January 23, four days into his second term, which he had won with the most commanding landslide in U.S. history, President Richard Nixon went on TV to announce, "We have concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and South Asia." The Vietnam War was over—"peace with honor," in the phrase the president repeated six more times.

But "it wasn't like 1945, when the end of the war brought a million people downtown to cheer," Mike Royko, the *Chicago Daily News'* regular-guy columnist, wrote. "Now the president comes on TV, reads his speech, and without a sound the country sets the clock and goes to bed." He was grateful for it. "There is nothing to cheer about this time. Except that it is over.... Mr. Nixon's efforts to inject glory into our involvement were hollow. All he had to say was that it is finally over."

Royko continued, "It is hard to see the honor.... Why kid ourselves? They didn't die for anyone's freedom. They died because we made a mistake. And we can't justify it with slogans and phrases from other times.

"It was a war that made the sixties the most terrible decade our history.... If we insist on looking for something of value in this war then maybe it is this:

"Maybe we finally have the painful knowledge that we can never again believe everything our leaders tell us."

Others, though, longed for the old patriotic rituals of reconciliation. And their vehicle became the prisoners of war held in Hanoi by our Communist enemies. "The returning POWs," Secretary of Defense Elliot Richardson told the president, "have dramatically launched what DOD is trying to do to restore the military to its proper position." The president, pleased, agreed: "We now have an invaluable opportunity to revise the history of this war."

It began twenty days after the president's speech, at the airport in Hanoi. What the Pentagon dubbed "Operation Homecoming" turned the network news into a nightly patriotic spectacle. Battered camouflage buses conveyed the first sixty men to the planes that would take them to Clark Air Base in the Philippines; a Navy captain named Galand Kramer unfurled a homemade sign out the window, scrawled on a scrap of cloth: GOD BLESS AMERICA & NIXON. The buses emptied; officers shouted out commands in loud American voices to free American men, who marched forth in smart formation, slowing to accommodate comrades on crutches. On the planes, and on TV, they kissed nurses, smoked too many American cigarettes, circulated news magazines with their wives and children on the cover, and drank a pasty white nutrient shake whose taste they didn't mind, a newsman explained, because it was the first cold drink some of them had had in eight years. On one of the three planes they passed a wriggling puppy from lap to lap. "He was a Communist dog," explained the Navy commander who smuggled him to freedom in his flight bag, "but not anymore!"

At Clark, the tarmac was thronged by kids in baseball and Boy Scout uniforms, women in lawn chairs with babes in arms, airmen with movie cameras, all jostling one another for a better view of a red carpet that had been borrowed at the last minute from Manila's InterContinental Hotel because the one Clark used for the usual round of VIPs wasn't sumptuous enough. In a crisp brocaded dress uniform with captain stripes newly affixed, Navy flier Jeremiah Denton, the first to descend, stood erect before the microphone and pronounced in a slowly swelling voice:

"We are honored to have the opportunity to serve our country—"
(A stately echo: "*country-country—country*...")
"We are profoundly grateful to our Commander in Chief and our nation for this day."
("*Day—day—day*...")
"God—"
("*God—God—God*...")
"Bless—"
("*Bless—bless—bless*...")
"America!"
("*America—America—America*...")

In days to come cameras lingered on cafeteria trays laden with strawberry pie, steak, corn on the cob, Cornish game hens, ice cream, and eggs. ("Beautiful!" sighed a man in a hospital gown on TV to a fry cook whipping up eggs.) When the men were in Hawaii for refueling on Valentine's Day, the cameras luxuriated over the nurses who defied orders and broke through the security line to bestow leis on their heroes. Then the cameras followed the men to the base exchange, where a boom mike overheard Captain Kramer gingerly trying on a pair of bell-bottomed pants: "I must say, they're a little different from what I would normally wear!"

The next stop was Travis Air Force Base in California, where for twelve long years the flag-draped coffins had come home. Now it was the setting for Times Square 1945 images: wives leaping into husbands' arms; teenagers unabashedly knocking daddies off their feet; seven-year-olds bringing up the rear, sheepish, shuffling—they had never met their fathers before. From there the men shipped out to service hospitals around the country, especially prepared for their return with color TVs and bright yellow bedspreads to mask the metallic hospital tone; once more words like "*God—God—God*" and "*duty—duty—duty*" and "*honor—honor—honor*" and "*country—country—country*" echoed across airport tarmacs. The first men to touch ground had been given expedited discharge to comfort terminally ill relatives. Press accounts credited at least one mother with a miraculous recovery. Miracles, according to the press, were thick on the ground.

> *"The first thing she did when she raced to embrace her husband.... was slip his wedding ring on his finger. The ring, she told reporters, had been sent to her, along with her husband's wallet. . . ."*
>
> *" 'By all rights he should have come out on a stretcher. But he refused and was determined he was going to come out walking.' "*
>
> *"When Captain John Nasmyth Jr. landed after years of captivity, a dozen strangers rushed up to him and thrust into his hand metal bracelets bearing his name. The strangers had been wearing the bracelets for as long as two years or more, as amulets of their concern and their faith in his safe return."*

Those bracelets: invented by a right-wing Orange County, California, radio host named Bob Dornan, they became a pop culture phenomena in 1970 after being introduced at a "Salute to the Armed Forces" rally in Los Angeles hosted by Governor Ronald Reagan. By the summer of 1972, they were selling at the rate of some ten thousand per day. Wearers vowed never to remove them until the name stamped on the metal came home. Some, the *New York Times* reported, believed them to "possess medicinal powers"—and not just the children who displayed them two, ten, a dozen to an arm. A Wimbledon champ said one cured his tennis elbow. The pop singers Sonny and Cher wore them on their hit TV variety show. Lee Trevino insisted his bracelet saved his golf game. And now that they were no longer needed, there was talk of melting them down for a national monument on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

When Captain Nasmyth arrived in his hometown, he was led to a billboard that read HANOI FREE JOHN NASMYTH. He chopped it down with a ceremonial ax, his entire community gathered round as a fifty-three-piece band blared "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." A black POW addressed a undergraduate classroom at a black university in Tennessee. The students examined him as if they had unearthed, a newspaper said, a "member of a nearly extinct sociological species: American Negro, circa 1966." He told them, "We have the greatest country in the world." That made front-page news, too.

One of the most quoted returning warriors was a colonel who

noted all the signs reading "We Love You." "In a deeper sense," he said, "I think what people are saying is 'We Love America.'" Another announced the greatest Vietnam miracle of all: that the POWs had *won the Vietnam War*. "I want you all to remember that we walked out of Hanoi as winners. We're not coming home with our tails between our legs. We returned with honor."

NBC broadcast from a high school in a tiny burg in Iowa—John Wayne's hometown—where wood shop students fashioned a giant key to the city for a POW native son; then the anchorman threw to his correspondent in the Philippines, who filled five full minutes of airtime calling the names, ranks, service branch, and hometowns of twenty exuberant Americans as they bounded, limped, or, occasionally, were borne upon stretchers, down the red carpet, to their next stop, the base cafeteria. ("Scrambled eggs!" "How many?" "How many can you handle?") The screen filled with a red-white-and-blue banner. NBC's Jack Perkins signed off: "The prisoners' coming back seems the one thing about Vietnam that has finally made all Americans finally, indisputably, *feel good*."

Not all Americans. Columnist Pete Hamill, on Valentine's Day in the liberal *New York Post*, pointed out that the vast majority of the prisoners were bomber pilots, and thus were "prisoners because they had committed unlawful acts"—killing civilians in an undeclared war. He compared waiting for the POWs to come home to his "waiting for a guy up at Sing Sing one time, who had done hard time for armed robbery."

There was the *New York Times*, which in one of its first dispatches from the Philippines reported, "Few military people here felt the return of the prisoners marked the end of the fighting. 'They're sending out just as many as come back,' said a young Air Force corporal who works at the airport. 'They're all going to Thailand, they're just moving the boundaries of the war back.'"

Not even all POWs agreed they were heroes. When the first Marine to be repatriated arrived at Camp Pendleton, every jarhead and civilian employee on base stood at attention to receive him. After the burst of applause stopped, Edison Miller held up a clenched fist in the manner favored by left-wing revolutionaries, then turned his back to the crowd.

In fact nothing about the return of the POWs was indisputable; the defensiveness of the president's rhetoric demonstrated that. At a meeting of the executive council of the AFL-CIO in Florida on February 19, Nixon spoke of the "way that our POWs could come off those planes with their heads high, knowing that they had not fought in vain." The next day, before a joint session of the South Carolina legislature, he answered a Gold Star Mother who wrote to him questioning the meaning of her son's sacrifice: "I say to the members of this assembly gathered here that James did not die in vain, that the men who went to Vietnam and have served there with honor did not serve in vain, and that our POWs, as they return, did not make the sacrifices they made in vain."

With honor, not in vain: a whole lot of people must have been worrying otherwise. Or else it wouldn't have been repeated so much.

"The nation begins again to feel itself whole," proclaimed *Newsweek*. *Time* speculated how "these impressive men who had become symbols of America's sacrifice in Indochina might help the country heal the lingering wounds of war." However, some stubbornly refused to be healed. It would take more than a "Pentagon pin-up picture," a *Newsweek* reader wrote, to make her forget "that these professional fighting men were trained in the calculated destruction of property and human life." A *Time* reader spoke up for his fellow "ex-grunts," who had received no welcoming parades: "Why were we sneaked back into our society? So our country could more easily forget the crimes we committed in its name?"

TURN ON THE TV, OPEN A NEWSPAPER OR A DENTIST-OFFICE MAGAZINE, and a new journalistic genre was now impossible to avoid: features that affected to explain to these Rip van Winkles all they had missed while incommunicado in prison camps at a time when, as NBC's gruff senior commentator David Brinkley put it, "a decade now is about equal to what a century used to be, because change is so fast."

On February 22 the *Today* show devoted both its hours to the exercise. "Generally, they've been years of crisis," the anchorman began.

A DEMAND EQUALITY sign:

"They walked in picket lines, they badgered congressmen, they formed pressure groups"—Who? The attractive blond newscaster (there weren't any of those in 1965), whose name was Barbara Walters, was speaking of women, only ordinary women. "They strived for 'lib,'" she continued—"as in liberation."

A mob of long-haired young men:

"Protest, demonstrations, disorders, riots, even death flared" on elite college campuses, where students "didn't trust anyone over thirty" and contested "the whole fabric of Western Judeo-Christian morality."

Gene Shalit, *Today*'s bushy-haired entertainment critic, reported how "federal legislation brought the vote to two million more blacks," and that "in 1964, when the first POWs were taken in Vietnam, most of us thought that was what was wanted. The phrase most often used was 'equal opportunity.' . . . Then came 1967 and a riot in Detroit. . . . There was Malcolm X, a failure in every way according to the 'white' code; he became a folk hero among blacks."

Nineteen new nations, from Bangladesh to Botswana; a war in Israel won in six days—"but terrorism followed": cue picture of a man in a ski mask on a balcony in Munich, at the 1972 Olympics.

Bonnie and Clyde, the hit movie from 1967, made the criminal life "look like fun and games" and changed Hollywood; *The Godfather*, from 1972, "the biggest moneymaker since 1965's *Sound of Music*," "at once glorified and sentimentalized the mafia." *Last Tango in Paris*, in theaters now, featured "clear depictions of the most elemental sexual acts, and perhaps some aberrations as well, but what it shows most is that here in New York at five dollars a ticket the film is a sellout, and that ordinary respectable folks like you are all going to see it."

Finally there came a familiar Hollywood image: a tall, handsome man in a Stetson. But the still was from *Midnight Cowboy*, and the camera pulled back to show that the titular cowboy was hugging a shrunken and disheveled Jewish man, and Barbara Walters explained it signified the new Hollywood trend "toward dealing openly with homosexuality."

Assassinations and attempted assassinations: Malcolm X. Martin Luther King. Robert F. Kennedy. George Wallace.

Fashion: "*Unisex*—remember that word. . . ."

Some ninety minutes later, two chin-stroking *penseurs* were asked by the stern-voiced anchorman what was the most profound change the POWs faced. Answered the editor of *Intellectual Digest*: "For the first time Americans have had at least a partial loss in the fundamental belief in ourselves. We've always believed we were the new men, the new people, the new society. The 'last best hope on earth,' in Lincoln's terms. For the first time, we've really begun to doubt it."

THIS PRETENSE THAT SOME SIX HUNDRED POWS NEWLY RETURNED TO their families would want to waste two hours of their lives learning about the latest slang from Gene Shalit felt a little bit fantastic. But the ritual was not for them. It was for us—all those Americans doubting for the first time that America might just not be the last best hope on earth. "Having missed much of the destructiveness of these past few years," one letter writer to the *Washington Post* exulted, they had "preserved a vision of the way America ought to be." As if these men might somehow be able to mystically deliver us across the bridge of years—to the time before the storm. It was their gift to us.

On the *CBS Evening News* the same day as that *Today* show, a lovely bride was seen with a man in officer's dress, a wedding march pealing forth from the organ. Walter Cronkite narrated:

"Dorothy said her husband's return was like a resurrection, and that for her it was like a new life beginning. So she went out and bought an all-new white wedding gown. And Dorothy and Johnny Ray reaffirmed the marriage vow they first made four and a half years ago."

(Cut to ten seconds on the long white train of her gown, then the cross above the altar; fifteen seconds of him slipping on the wedding ring.)

"It was a short, simple ceremony."

(Kiss, organ, recessional.)

"Captain and Mrs. Johnny Ray will soon be home to their three children in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma. David Dick, CBS News at the post chapel, Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas."

That was one sort of homecoming story. Here was another: at Balboa Naval hospital, where many POWs convalesced, a wife later told an oral historian, "It was like the Spanish Inquisition. Everyone asked how the wives had behaved. I could hear beatings in some rooms. A lot of women had been swinging."

Certain outlets told many similar stories—like the "newspaper of record," the *New York Times*, which in 1878 had scolded the "small and suspicious circles" who dared suggest the Civil War had not ended America's racial ordeal. The *Times* was a very different institution almost a century later. Most American institutions were very different from what they had been even a decade before. For the small and suspicious circles had expanded exponentially.

On its front page on February 5 you could meet Alice Cronin, dressed in faded hip-hugging bell-bottomed jeans and no shoes, smoking cigarettes, hair flopping loose, posing outside her San Diego home as movers unloaded the fashionable puffy white leather couch she bought "for the return of her husband, a Navy pilot held by Hanoi for six years." She was worried: "Mike married a very traditional wife.... Now my ideas and values have changed.... I can't sit home and cook and clean house. I'm very career oriented, and I just hope he goes along and agrees with that...he's missed out on a lot—liking a more casual lifestyle, being nonmaterialistic." She hoped he understood why she didn't trust a single thing the administration said about Vietnam. She also hoped he would go along with something else: "shifting sexual mores, the whole thing about relationships not necessarily being wrong outside of marriage. I know myself really well sexually, and he's missed out on a good deal of that."

She was contrasted to Sybil Stockdale, a classic by-the-book officer's wife, who spoke from "her sunny kitchen," where she was busy mending the rug left over when her husband, James Stockdale, the highest-ranking Navy POW, took off for his first bombing mission over the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964. For his return, she explained, "I want the living room to look the same."

There were two groups of POW wives, Alice Cronin explained. "I'm definitely in the second group." There were, by 1973, two groups of just about everything. Two kinds of POW reports, for instance. Some played up the sentimental rituals of reconciliation. An example of the other kind ran on NBC—cutting from Operation Homecoming footage at Travis Air Force Base to the hospital bed of a sad-eyed, fidgety Marine private, paralyzed from the waist down, complaining, "We were kind of snuck in the back door."

Newspapers in small towns like Bend, Oregon; Reading, Pennsylvania; and Lewiston, Maine, ran with the Navy's press release about the poetry written in captivity by a Navy commander in tribute to the "women who wait at home" (*"Are not these women, of men gone to war / The unsung heroes, today as before...."*). But in the *New York Times*, columnists like Tom Wicker rued "the warped sense of priorities on the home front" that allotted so much more attention to "these relatively few POW's than the 50,000 dead boys who came home in body bags, some of them with smuggled heroin obscenely concealed in their mangled flesh," and "for whom the only bracelet is a band of needle marks." He noted that the administration had frozen funding for treatment for drug-addicted veterans and in its fiscal 1974 budget proposed to arbitrarily limit the allowable number of patients in veterans hospitals. Meanwhile the *Times* editorialized that in the "succession of hand salutes, stiffly prepared statements, medical bulletins, and canned handouts concerning the joys of steak and ice cream" of Operation Homecoming, the "hard-won lessons of Vietnam are in danger of being lost." Which, on the merits, was sound editorial judgment. For that had been Richard Nixon's intention for the POW issue from the start.

When American pilots were first taken prisoner in North Vietnam, U.S. policy had been pretty much to ignore them—part and parcel of President Lyndon B. Johnson's determination to keep the costs of his increasingly futile escalation from the public. The enemy, though, preferred publicity—which was why, in June 1966, they announced to the world these pilots would be put on trial as "air pirates," and paraded them through Hanoi past jeering crowds for the cameras on the Fourth of July. In 1967 the first American flier was tortured into appearing on film to say he was being treated humanely. Also in 1967, the first American peace activists visited North Vietnam, documented widespread civilian carnage, and returned with a devastating argument: The Pentagon claimed its laser-guided bombs were the most accurate in the history of warfare. But if that was true, pilots had to know they were targeting civilian areas—and if that was false, then who knew what else the Pentagon was lying about?

A war of position emerged, peaceniks versus the Pentagon, with the POWs tossed about like political footballs. Communist officials began releasing to antiwar activists small numbers of prisoners who had arrived at doubts about the war. The Pentagon worked to silence them. Meanwhile, Sybil Stockdale organized, against the Pentagon's wishes, a "League of Wives of American Prisoners of War" (later the National League of Families of Prisoners of War), which agitated for attention to the prisoners' plight. From two directions at once, Johnson's attempt to play down the existence of hundreds of American prisoners came a cropper. And in 1969, the new Republican president had spied in the dilemma a political opportunity.

One day in the first spring of Richard Nixon's presidency, reporters at a routine Pentagon briefing perked up when the Secretary of Defense himself, Melvin Laird, took the podium. He confirmed the existence of from 500 to 1,300 of what he termed "POW/MIAs." This was new phraseology, partly cynical and strategic: downed fliers not confirmed as actual prisoners used to be classified not as "Missing in Action" but "Body Unrecovered." Soon the administration began referring to these 1,300 *as if* they were, every one of them, actually prisoners. "The North Vietnamese claimed they were treated humanely," Secretary Laird intoned gravely. "I am distressed by the fact that there is clear evidence that this is not the case."

It was the American public's introduction to these men. Laird demanded that the enemy reveal their names, send home the sick and wounded, and allow impartial inspections and free exchange of mail—the Geneva Conventions, he announced, required no less. "Most importantly, we seek the prompt release of all American prisoners," he said, before launching into an emotional peroration about the enemy's cruelty: "Hundreds of American wives, children, and parents continue to live in a tragic state of uncertainty caused by the lack of information concerning the fate of their loved ones."

The North Vietnamese officials' astonishment was like that of the British officer after the Great War who, witnessing the way America trampled on logic and good military order to get its troops home first, remarked, "How odd it is that only American boys have mothers." These Vietnamese men had lost children themselves—to American bombers that by their lights flew in plain defiance of the most basic Geneva Convention requirements: that wars be declared, that civilians be spared. They had seen schools, hospitals, farmers' fields obliterated. They had lined streets with mile after mile of underground concrete cylinders in which Hanoi residents cowered every time they heard the approaching airborne hum. They answered Secretary Laird that they would not so much as give out prisoners' names "as long as the United States does not cease its war of aggression and withdraw its troops from Vietnam."

For Nixon, this was a political boon. A *Washington Post* editorial enshrined the bomber pilots as pluperfect victims: "It is hard to see how so retrograde a response advances the interests of any government that seeks to present itself to the world as fair and humane." The Pentagon and State Department sent forth public relations cadres and co-opted Sybil Stockdale's embryonic League of Wives of American Prisoners of War, sometimes inventing chapters outright. When Hanoi announced on July 4—a favorite day for Communist propaganda aimed at international opinion—that North Vietnam would be releasing more prisoners to antiwar activists, the Pentagon reversed its ban on its members speaking to the press. Images of families without fathers began showing up in the weekly picture magazines—martyrs to an enemy so devious, as the *Armed Forces Journal* put it, they denied hundreds of little boys and girls "a right to know if their fathers were dead or alive." Their North Vietnamese captors, yet more astonished, reflected on the *tens of thousands* of prisoners whom America's South Vietnamese allies kept likewise incommunicado, and redoubled their defiance.

On Labor Day, 1969, the campaign intensified: the Pentagon put two freed prisoners behind a press conference podium, where they described solitary confinement in dark stone rooms, beatings, bodies bound in cruel contortions for hours with straps and ropes. They added cinematic embellishments: that POW Fred Cherry had been hung from the ceiling by his broken arm, which became so infected he almost lost it (on the tarmac at Andrews Air Force Base four years later, it became plain Cherry's arm was in fact perfectly intact); that Navy flier Richard Stratton had had his fingernails pried loose (they weren't). The timing was strategic: a peace group had just reported back on the treatment of prisoners by our South Vietnamese allies, in prison camps designed and built by us; they were manacled to the floor in crippling underground bamboo "tiger cages," many merely for the crime of advocating peace, but the American military's advisor had described these prisons as being like "a Boy Scout recreation camp."

At the peace talks in Paris, the "POW issue" became the cornerstone of Nixon's stalling tactics to settle the war on his preferred terms—another astonishment for the North Vietnamese: in previous wars, the disposition of prisoners had been something settled *following* the cessation of hostilities. Meanwhile, stateside, a dialectic unfolded: whenever the public showed signs of turning away en masse in disgust from the war, the martyrs in the Hanoi Hilton were symbolically marched to the foreground, their suffering families walking point.

At Christmastime, precisely one month after investigative reporter Seymour Hersh revealed the My Lai Massacre, POW wives were invited to stand mute beside the president in the Oval Office while he lied that "this government will do everything that it possibly can to separate out the prison issue and have it handled as it should be, as a separate issue on a humanitarian basis." On Christmas Eve, three airliners leased by Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot lifted off. One, christened "The Spirit of Christmas," bore fifty-eight POW wives and ninety-four of their children to demand a meeting with Communist negotiators in Paris. The others, christened "Peace on Earth" and "Goodwill Toward Men," tried to deliver thirty tons of Christmas dinners, holiday gifts, clothing, and medical supplies directly to the prisoners in Hanoi. (In Paris, the wives were lectured on truths stern-faced North Vietnamese diplomats considered self-evident: that the way to free their husbands was to prevail upon their government to stop the futile and sadistic terror bombing of North Vietnam, for which there was no sanction in international law. A wife asked: "What should I tell my son, age nine, when he asks where is my father and when is he coming home?" An apparatchik responded: "Tell him his father is a murderer of North Vietnamese children and that he is being punished." The wives emerged too shattered to speak to the press.)

In spring 1970, which bloomed in the shadow of the expansion of the ground war into Cambodia and the martyrdom of four college students at Kent State University in Ohio, seven hundred POW/MIA relatives were flown to Washington at taxpayer expense for a rally hosted by the Daughters of the American Revolution and funded by defense contractors. Ross Perot testified before Congress of the North Vietnamese's incredulity at all this concern over "just 1,400 men." (Americans were

plainly more morally sensitive than Communists.) He then relayed how, when they told him of hospital wards shattered by American bombs, he promised to pay to rebuild them himself, as if that solved the problem. The first POW bracelets were unveiled at that spring's annual "Salute to the Military" ball in Los Angeles. Governor Ronald Wilson Reagan presided, and Hollywood choreographer LeRoy Prinz, who had worked with Reagan on the 1944 film *Hollywood Canteen*, directed the grand cavalcade.

By then, Jonathan Schell of the *New Yorker* observed, the American people were acting "as though the North Vietnamese had kidnapped 400 Americans and the United States had gone to war to retrieve them." Matchbooks, lapel pins, billboards, T-shirts, and bumper stickers ("POWs NEVER HAVE A NICE DAY!") proliferated; fighter jets made thunderous football stadium fly-bys; full-page ads blossomed in every newspaper, urging Hanoi to have a heart and release the prisoners for the sake of the children. "They just dig holes in the ground and drop them in," one wife explained to a magazine of her understanding of the Hanoi Hilton. "They throw food down to them, and let them live there in their waste." She was confused. In fact she was precisely describing how prisoners were treated in *South Vietnam*, as revealed in a stunning photo essay from the American-built prison camp at Con Son Island in a July 1970 issue of *Life*.

Here was how the Vietnam War had deformed America: by making such intellectual distortion systematic—a "lunatic semiology," as a wise historian later described it, where "sign and referent have scarcely any proportionate relation at all." It was one of the reasons the suspicious circles began expanding exponentially, even into the ranks of POW families themselves—who reasoned that if Nixon said there would be war so long as there were prisoners, and the Communists said there would be prisoners so long as there was war, as Tom Wicker wrote, "we may keep both troops and prisoners there forever."

In 1971, the summer the *Times* published the Pentagon Papers, revealing in the government's own hand that most of what the American people had been told about Vietnam for twenty-five years had been lies, a rump group of antiwar wives broke off from Sybil Stockdale's League of Families, demanding the White House stop treating their husbands as "political hostages." They appeared on platforms with Jane Fonda and John Kerry, wrote letters to the president demanding "a complete troop withdrawal NOW!" and seconded the nomination of 1972 Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, who pledged to remove all American forces from Vietnam within sixty days of his inauguration.

But Richard Nixon said that this would be surrender, and that Americans did not surrender. He won his reelection mandate, 61 percent and forty-nine states. Seventy-eight days later he triumphantly announced "peace with honor." His critics argued there had been no honor: that the terms he had arrived at were the same ones on the table when Lyndon Johnson began peace negotiations in 1968—purchased at the expense of 15,183 more American dead and four million more tons of American ordnance over North and South Vietnam. The evening news, meanwhile, showed skirmishes still breaking out in all three Southeast Asian nations, and American bombing runs continuing into Cambodia, where the government had almost ceased to function despite hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid—it sounded a little like South Vietnam ten years earlier. The story the administration was telling about prisoners of war was instrumental to how it was attempting to occlude these facts.

The POWs returned. God bless America. Let the healing begin.

FOUR HUNDRED PHOTOGRAPHERS, CAMERAMEN, JOURNALISTS, AND support staff encamped at Clark Air Base in the Philippines to cover the return. Then they learned their contact with the heroes would be third-hand and censored—the better to preserve the men's health, the Pentagon insisted, though according to the telegram the *New York Times* fired off to the secretary of defense "they were healthy enough to eat anything, horse around in the hospital, go shopping, see movies, and talk to virtually everyone else who runs into them." So why couldn't they speak with reporters? The *Los Angeles Times* printed the concerns of a sociology professor: "The last thing the Pentagon wants is the inevitable necessity of the public—via its surrogate, the press—confronting these men and discussing, in however imperfect form, the war they wasted their years upon." Then, the explanation shifted: access to POWs would be limited to protect their privacy. The *New York Times* responded to *that* on the news pages: "They did not say, however, why the prisoners would be placed under orders forbidding public statements if they wanted to make them." Then the *Times* reported a Pentagon policy that civilian POWs would be given medical treatment only if they agreed not to talk to the press.

On February 21 the newspaper of record, noting how the POWs' praise for Richard Nixon sounded suspiciously close to the administration's own catchphrases, reported that "the military's repatriation effort was carefully programmed and controlled" by a team of nearly eighty military public relations men. The *Washington Post*'s ombudsman, Robert C. Maynard, echoed the argument the next morning in an essay headlined "Return of the Prisoners: Script by the Military." "Not surprisingly," he concluded, "we received a number of paeans to 'honorable peace' and could only wonder how that phrase happened to be among the first to pop out of the mouths of men in captivity for such long periods of time." He also said, "They return to a society more surely programmed in 'them-against-us' terms than the one they left."

That was true enough. The *Post,* led by its investigative reporting team of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, had led all other media in foregrounding the scandal that ensued after men tied to Nixon's White House and reelection campaign were caught breaking into the Watergate hotel and office complex back in June. The White House had made excoriating the *Post's* alleged vendetta against it—and characterizing the *Post* as a pillar of the "liberal establishment"—central to its campaign rhetoric. And in March 1973, Nixon's opinion of the *Post* was echoed when the entire letters page was given over to readers' responses to the ombudsman's report. Many defended the president. The POWs' "feel gratitude toward [Nixon] for sticking out the war and making their own sacrifice meaningful," a Henry T. Simmons of Washington wrote. "This has got to be intolerable to the *Washington Post.*" A retired Air Force officer wrote: "The media . . . must be embarrassed and galled. . . . Most Americans were thrilled. . . . You can be sure that I am not following a military script when I say, as I now do, 'God bless America!'" A housewife from Staunton, Virginia, signing her letter "Mrs. Frank J. McDonough," noted, "Imagine Maynard's reaction . . . if the men had returned bitter at their country and praising Hanoi the way he wanted them to. No mention would have been made of Hanoi propaganda, or the one-sided views of America presented in newspapers like yours that they were undoubtedly permitted to read. We would have heard nothing but praise for their 'courage' and 'forthrightness' in presenting 'the truth.' As a matter of fact, if even one POW does attack America, I'm sure it will be all over your front page."

Others, however, spoke for the suspicious circles: "You really told it like it is," a Dorothy Woodell of Sacramento, California, wrote, noting she had made Xerox copies of the article to send "to everyone I know." She was certain "there is more to be said on the issue," but added "I'm sure that if you had said it, it never would have been printed anyhow."

THE POW STORY TOOK SHAPE AS A DOMESTIC CIVIL WAR. A *NEW YORK Times* dispatch from the Philippines recorded, "When one man deplaned here, his wife rushed toward him—but he warned her off with a stern whisper: 'I have to salute the flag, don't bother me.'" A February 23 front-page story by Seymour Hersh reported that "camp life included occasional fist fights, a few near-suicides, and many cliques.... One pilot reportedly pulled a knife on another prisoner during an argument." It ran the day of returnees' first stateside press conferences, where they insisted that with most of their comrades still in the hands of the enemy, they wouldn't comment on what had happened in captivity. Aggressive network correspondents pushed and pushed, as if to break them. Rattled, Captain James Mulligan (who had recently learned his own wife had been an antiwar leader) grabbed a microphone. "I feel very strongly that it's about time the American people started pulling together. It's about time we all realize where we're going! It's about time we start raising the flag instead of burning it. I know people have strong feelings! ... But we are all Americans. And it's about time we all get back to, to—the main thing!"

The follow-up questions grew sharper. ("Are you 100 percent satisfied with the way the Nixon administration handled the war?") The answers became more defensive. One POW said he was "fantastically impressed with the courage that President Nixon displayed in an election year"; Robinson Risner, one of the most famous of the POWs, who had been on the cover of *Time* in 1965 as "the classic example of the kind of dedicated military professional who was leading the American effort in Vietnam," felt "beyond any doubt" that war protesters "kept us in prison an extra year or two." "What do you think of the divisiveness?" an airman was asked. He responded, "Once a week we would get up and say the Pledge of Allegiance; we could not understand how people could be so unpatriotic as to *condemn the Government in time of war* and like Captain Mulligan said—and I think it's a beautiful phrase—I think it's time we start *raising flags instead of burning them.*" (The president underlined those words in his briefing on the press conferences.)

The *New York Times* kept rolling out exposés—for instance, reporting that the California-based organization known as VIVA, or "Voices in Vital America" (originally formed, with the intention of harassing campus antiwar activists, as the "Victory in Vietnam Association"), had earned $3,693,661 in 1972, "almost entirely" from sales of POW bracelets, which it marked up for a 400 percent profit, and that it hoped "sales of the bracelets with the names of those still missing may pick up now." NBC ran an exposé from the South Vietnamese prison island of Con Son. Anchorman John Chancellor began by reminding viewers that North Vietnam had always offered to release American prisoners in exchange for prisoners held by South Vietnam, and that still, a month after

the peace settlement, "the South Vietnamese are holding about 100,000 political prisoners." He appeared stricken by the cruel absurdity of the facts he was forced to relate. The reporter in the field, who had long hair, interviewed two American hospital workers in South Vietnam who said that if prisoners didn't give the right answers to interrogators they "reached under the ribs and cracked the rib," and presented before the cameras a feeble old woman, a former Con Son prisoner, her eyes swollen shut, being hand-fed like a baby because she could not eat by herself. *Time's* correspondent described the released prisoners he had seen as "grotesque sculptures of scarred flesh and gnarled limbs. They move like crabs, skittering across the floor on buttocks and palms."

On Wednesday, February 28, a shouting match broke out on the floor of the New York State Assembly. One assemblyman offered a resolution honoring Vietnam Veterans Week—"in support of liberty and freedom of all men" and in "rededication to the precepts that have made America such a tower of strength among the nations of the world."

"This is a lot of bunk!" exploded Assemblyman Franz S. Leichter, Democrat of Manhattan. "We were fighting for Thieu and bamboo cages for his political opponents!"

A Republican from Brooklyn: "Your opposing this resolution is a disgrace as far as I'm concerned!"

A conservative Democrat: "I have stood this nonsense long enough. For three years I've listened to him and his peace movement. I ask you all in the spirit of America and the spirit of the American flag to vote in favor, and God bless America."

A liberal: "There's a lot of difference between blessing America and blessing Richard Milhous Nixon." He added that it was "a credit to a nonwhite race who'd been invaded and pillaged that they did treat the prisoners the way they did."

That Thursday, newspapers ran a United Press International interview with a Minnesota POW who reported that his darkest day in captivity came when he heard of the reelection of the president. On Friday the Nixon administration worked furiously on political damage control after its controversial announcement that North Vietnam would enjoy reconstruction aid as part of the postwar settlement. Routine in the case of previous wars, this time the proposal brought down a rain of political vituperation. After all, hadn't the president himself said these Communists were merciless torturers?

On Sunday the next batch of 106 POWs left Hanoi, their cult more insistent, more pious, more defensively reactionary: "We wanted to come home, but we wanted to come home with honor," a colonel boomed from the tarmac microphone at Clark. "President Nixon has brought us home with honor. God bless those Americans who supported our President during our long ordeal." On Monday the *Post* featured a profile headlined "Free Navy POW Sure U.S. Right in Asia," whose subject said he was "glad to put my wife back in skirts. I think a woman should be a woman and not whatever they're trying to be with all these movements."

The skeptics were growing more insistent, too. "These people had their feet on the ground while in prison," a Pentagon source told the *Times'* Seymour Hersh for his article "POWs Planned Business Venture." "They heard enough and knew enough . . . 'to realize that there would be demands for books, speeches, and endorsements. . . . There's really nothing sinful in taking advantage of what's left,' the officer said. 'That's the way to play the game.'" "The POWs: Focus of Division," the *Times* reported the next morning in a summary of Operation Homecoming so far. "It scares me in a way," they quoted an official of the National League of Families as saying. "If the prisoners are not careful they will destroy their credibility. They've been away so long, they don't realize the depth of division in this country."

That depth of division: the same afternoon CBS announced a program it would be featuring in prime time, two nights later, an adapted version of a surreal off-Broadway drama that would soon win the Tony Award for best play, *Sticks and Bones*, by Vietnam veteran David Rabe. It opened on a bucolic suburban sitcom family. A sergeant shows up at the door to return their son, blinded in Vietnam. He can't stay for coffee: "I've got trucks out there backed up for blocks. . . . And when I get back they'll be layin' all over the grass; layin' there all over the grass, their backs been broken, their brains jellied, their insides turned into garbage. No-legged boys and one-legged boys. I'm due in Harlem; I got to get to the Bronx and Queens, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Reading. I don't have time for coffee. I've got deliveries all over this country." The father is named "Ozzie." The mother is "Harriet." They are so horrified that their son has fallen in love with a Vietnamese woman that they manipulate him into killing himself, then throw out his body with the trash.

Newsweek's reviewer, a fellow traveler of the New Left who wrote under the pen name "Cyclops," rhapsodized of the playwright: "Like a wounded Dreiser or a young O'Neill, he blunders into deep terrors and thrashes there. Such is his strength that he pulls us in after him. We are back among primal things, evil ceremonies, the sacrifice of the blind seer, the scapegoat become garbage, the rites claustrophobic. The final image on the TV screen is so perfect and so perfectly appalling that your

mind will want to throw up." The *Times'* critic thought the production "not very good," though he said it went without saying that it had to be broadcast nonetheless.

Local CBS affiliates disagreed. "We did not feel it was appropriate for TV in Detroit, where our working-class audience would be offended," said one station manager. An executive in Mississippi said, "They can't sanitize it enough to what suits me." After only two minutes of commercials were sold for the two-hour block, CBS's president released a statement: "In light of recent developments, many of us both at the network and among the stations are now convinced that its presentation on the air at this time might be unnecessarily abrasive to the feelings of millions of Americans whose lives or attention are at the moment emotionally dominated by the returning POWs and other veterans who have suffered the ravages of war."

The producer, Joseph Papp, said CBS was obligated to put on the show no matter who objected; it was a First Amendment issue. The American Civil Liberties Union got involved. A Syracuse, New York, station manager begged to be allowed to carry the feed: "Dammit, it's real. Life isn't just a bowl of cherries." But when the network broadcast was canceled, he was forced to show a Steve McQueen movie just like every other affiliate. "Only a society with a great deal more self-confidence than ours could stand the disruptiveness of high art on TV," wrote a liberal columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*.

On March 28, the last POW shot down over North Vietnam landed at Clark Air Base. His last name, coincidentally, was "Agnew," just like the jingoistic vice president. But this Agnew brazenly told the press there was neither honor nor peace in the Paris settlement. It was a cover-up, he said, predicting that as soon as the last American troops left, Communist troops would overrun South Vietnam. That same day, the Yale psychology professor Robert J. Lifton, who a decade and a half earlier had helped explain how Communist captors had "brainwashed" American POWs during the Korea War, argued in the *New York Times* that it was the American people who now were being brainwashed—in the very act of sanctifying men whose job was "saturation bombing of civilian areas with minimal military targets," but who were now held up as vessels of "pure virtue," propaganda tools for the "official mythology of peace with honor," in order to prevent the possibility of "extracting from this war its one potential benefit: political and ethical illumination arising from hard appraisals of what we did and why we did it."

And also on that same day, CBS president William Paley gave word on *Sticks and Bones*: "We will run the show when things have calmed down." *When things have calmed down:* that had been what Operation Homecoming was supposed to have done.

There were two tribes of Americans now.

One comprised the suspicious circles, which had once been small, but now were exceptionally broad, who considered the self-evident lesson of the 1960s and the low, dishonest war that defined the decade to be the imperative to question authority, unsettle ossified norms, and expose dissembling leaders—a new, higher patriotism for the 1970s. They lived, for example, in the sleepy suburb in Northern California visited by a *New York Times* writer who reported back that "people think and feel differently from what they once did. They ask questions, they reject assumptions, they doubt what they are told." They said things like, "Now I'd rather not say the pledge; it has such little meaning to me. The things that are in it just aren't true." They even included, among their numbers, career military men, like the returned POW who told NBC how much he appreciated returning to a country finally willing to reconsider its prejudices—"shedding its Linus blankets, starting to think for itself." They included officials of the big, "mainline" Protestant churches, who took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, on the day the last POW came home, criticizing Nixon for hosting South Vietnam's torture-master president, for whose preservation the nation had sacrificed some fifty-eight thousand soldiers and billions of dollars of treasure, as a "spiritual disaster for America"; and the American Psychological Association which proclaimed that the POWs had "been assigned the role of heroes in a war that has no heroes, the central role in an elaborate drama staged to provide justification for the President's policy, to create the illusion of victory and to arouse a sense of patriotic fervor."

And they included Lyndon Johnson's former press secretary, Bill Moyers, whose job had once been to sell America on the nobility of the Vietnam cause, and who now was an avuncular commentator for the Public Broadcasting Service. On TV he grilled General Maxwell Taylor about whether the recent "unworthy and unwinnable war" had made it harder to recruit forces for the new all-volunteer force, now that the draft had ended with the beginning of 1973. The general responded that those who had fought in Vietnam would refuse that characterization. Moyers asked why, if that were so, record numbers of them had deserted. The general insisted that was only because they had been poisoned by the liberal media. Moyers then asked why, if *that* was the case, so many of our allied European governments opposed the Vietnam War, too. Taylor responded that this was because they read the U.S. press—which, he said, should have been subject to wartime censorship.

General Taylor had once been a favorite general of Kennedy-era liberals. Robert F. Kennedy had called him "relentless in his determination to get at the truth," and named one of his sons after him. Now Maxwell Taylor was a tribune of the other tribe, the one that found another lesson to be self-evident: never break faith with God's chosen nation, especially in time of war—truth be damned.

This was Richard Nixon's tribe. The one that, by Election Day 1980, would end up prevailing in the presidential election. Though Richard Nixon, like Moses, would not be the one who led them to that promised land.

THE LAST FREEDOM BIRD ARRIVED AT TRAVIS AIR FORCE BASE IN CALIFORnia to a spontaneous chorus of "God Bless America" from the crowd of 6,500 who had waited hours through typhoon-like rains that tore chunks off nearby buildings. A new round of celebrations blossomed: local boys throwing out first pitches for opening day; drum and bugle corps; ice cream, steak, endless proud patriotic bluster from bunting-draped platforms. The ceremonial bestowing of gifts: Free use of a brand-new Ford LTD for a year. Free admission to Walt Disney World. Free passes, plated in gold, to every major-league baseball game—forever. Captain John Nasmyth appeared, impromptu, on *The Sonny & Cher Comedy Hour*.

And on the first of April, VIVA held a grand ball at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel hosted by Governor Reagan. Lorne Greene, who played the frontier patriarch on TV's *Bonanza*, introduced the distinguished personages on the dais, including John Wayne and astronaut Buzz Aldrin. All wore POW bracelets. Singer Martha Raye, a veteran of USO tours, was escorted by a Green Beret, and wore a green beret, too. Pat O'Brien, who costarred as Knute Rockne with Ronald Reagan in *Knute Rockne, All-American*, announced the color guard, and led the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." The president of Pepperdine University quoted Kipling.

Lorne Greene gestured for silence. The guests of honor marched forth in grand procession, two by two with their consorts, as the band struck up the anthem "Stout-Hearted Men": *"Start me with ten who are stout-hearted men, and I'll soon give you ten thousand more."*

The man held longest in Hanoi finally took the stage. "Let it loose!" Greene commanded. The crowd rose as one. Their ovation lasted eight minutes.

The evening's host took to the podium. Governor Reagan's final peroration was addressed to the men: "You gave America back its soul.

God bless a country that can produce men like you." He soon would sign a bill exempting them from state taxes on their earnings while they were in captivity—which could run, with combat pay and family allowances and retroactive promotions, to a lump sum, in 2010 figures, amounting to half a million dollars per POW. "It Won't Be Enough," read a headline in the *Los Angeles Sentinel.*

Then Reagan flew east—"back on the sawdust trail," he told the cloud of reporters who had started following him everywhere, because it looked like he might be running for president. To an ecstatic reception at a luncheon of Young Republicans in Washington, he said this business about the Watergate bugging caper was not relevant to their party's future: the presidential election of 1972 was "the most clear-cut choice in the last forty years," a "head-on confrontation between two opposing philosophies that have polarized this nation." Conservatism won, and would continue to win, he said—a curious argument given that the candidate who won had proposed programs of such dubiously conservative provenance as wage and price controls, a guaranteed minimum income, and the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Reagan traveled to New Orleans, where he extolled the virtues of free enterprise, cajoled his partisan audience to elect more Republicans to lesser offices, boasted of his recent welfare reform in California, and plugged his new tax limitation proposal. Then he brought up the stouthearted men—and nearly couldn't continue. He apologized afterward to reporters backstage: "I guess I'm going to have to quit talking about those fellows. I can't do it without choking up."

The reporters followed up a bit rabidly—asking whether he wrote his own speeches; about the recent appearance on TV of the last movie he made, *The Killers,* the only one in which he played a villain ("I wish they would stop showing it"); about whether he was running for president. (They always asked that; he always demurred, insisting, "The office seeks the man.")

Next, in Atlanta, he called Watergate a partisan witch hunt. The president already had his own Justice Department prosecuting the burglars, he said—"What more can you ask?"

He struck reporters as foolishly blithe. One of the Watergate burglars had just told the nation that the White House had pressured him to lie, in a cover-up he suspected went straight to the Oval Office, and that "members of my family have expressed fear for my life if I disclose the facts in this matter." Barry Goldwater said, "It's beginning to be like Teapot Dome." Republican officials reported fund-raising was near a standstill.

Only Reagan was calm. "This man has just been elected," he had reassured the anxious Young Republicans in Washington. Republicans possessed a "2-to-1 majority philosophically." Watergate did not matter—except if the liberals obsessively pursuing what he privately called the president's "lynching" were allowed to let it matter. At his weekly press conference in Sacramento, he called the president "a truthful man." In Atlanta he praised Nixon for refusing to allow his aides to testify before the Senate investigating committee. A reporter promptly pointed out that, no, the president had recently reversed course and ordered his aides to cooperate. Blithely indifferent to the contradiction, Reagan said he supported that, too, then promptly dismissed the whole matter with a quip. Democrats were in hysterics about someone bugging their office? "It seems to me that they should have been happy that somebody was willing to listen to them." Then he excused himself to meet with twenty-five top party contributors.

Let some cry havoc. Just this sort of performance of blitheness in the face of what others called chaos was fundamental to who Ronald Reagan was. It was fundamental to why he made so many others feel so good. Which was fundamental to what he was to become, and the way he changed the world.

CHAPTER TWO

Stories

PEOPLE TOLD STORIES ABOUT RONALD REAGAN—LEGENDS OF A MAN who was larger than life.

Stories about the day of his birth, in 1911. A snowstorm had made the roads of Tampico, Illinois, nearly impassable just as his tiny mother began a long and difficult labor. Of a mother's agony, a child was born. The doctor told her she would never bear another. The blustering Irish Catholic father swept in: "For such a little bit of a Dutchman," he cried, "he makes a hell of a lot of noise, doesn't he!" The mother replied, "I think he's perfectly wonderful. *Ronald Wilson Reagan.*"

There are other versions of the story, too—and they clash with the first. In one, after saying he "looks like a fat little Dutchman," Jack Reagan adds, "But who knows, he might grow up to be president someday." In another, Ronald Reagan was given the nickname "Dutch" not when he was an infant, and not by his father, but after he and his older brother, Neil, were marched off to the barber after growing their hair defiantly long. Neil ended up with a style Ronald said made him look like the cartoon character Moon Mullins; his lifelong nickname became "Moon." Neil snapped back that his little brother's made him look "Dutch." And then there is someone who claimed to know the Reagans when they were young, who did not recall Ronald ever being referred to as "Dutch" at all. Which may, or may not, square with the story as Ronald Reagan set it down in his memoir *An American Life*, in which he named *himself*: "I never thought 'Ronald' was rugged enough for a young red-blooded American boy and as soon as I could, I asked people to call me 'Dutch.'" It's hard to make stories about Ronald Reagan match up. Even, or perhaps especially, the stories Ronald Reagan told about himself—which are where most of the stories originated.

Stories about his first memory: a hot summer day in Galesburg, Illinois, a train depot, an ice wagon, two mischievous boys scurrying beneath a freight train to liberate some refreshing shards of ice—and a blast of steam as the train chuffs to life and nearly finishes them off. *An*

American Life adds the fillip: "Our mother, who had come out on the porch in time to see the escapade, met us in the middle of the park and inflicted the appropriate punishment." However, as president he once offered another "first memory" to admirers in Chicago, where he lived when he was four: Jack rushed in with the news of the tragedy of the capsizing of the SS *Eastland* in the Chicago River, killing more than 840, and sought to impress on his two boys the epochal nature of the event by fetching them downtown to view the scene.

The family lived in an apartment in Chicago for a year, after his father received an exceptionally promising department store job; it was one of more than a dozen rented homes in which Ronald Reagan would spend his childhood. In his first memoir, 1965's *Where's the Rest of Me,* he remembered teeming Chicago sidewalks lit by coin-operated gaslights; clanging horse-drawn fire trucks trailing clouds of steam (thus his first ambition, to be a firefighter); a beer truck that Neil tried to grab hold of that ran him over with its steel-rimmed wheels (the leg healed without complications, goes the story: a miracle). There was the time their mother was off on an endless errand, their father nowhere to be found. The boys wandered off from their apartment to find them, but not before blowing out what they thought were oil lamps. Since the lights they had blown out were fueled by gas, not oil, his parents returned to a house full of deadly methane. Meanwhile the boys crossed the University of Chicago's Midway—terra incognita—and got lost. A friendly drunk came upon them and returned them home. "Jack clobbered us," the story ends.

The family soon moved to a tiny town called Galesburg, where the tales are of a "Huck Finn–Tom Sawyer" idyll: swimming in clear-bottomed creeks and treacherous canals (Dutch was always the best swimmer), meadows to roam, caves to explore, trees to climb. Over-the-river-and-through-the-woods holidays at his mother's people's farm in the country. A magical vacant lot crawling with emerald-green snakes. Chaotic neighborhood football scrums: no real field, no yard lines, no goal, just a mob of excited youngsters chasing a lopsided ball one of the richer kids was able to buy. A story that was etched in strikingly specific detail: The five-year-old lay on the floor with the evening paper. Jack asked him what he was doing, and the little boy said he was reading. His skeptical father asked him to prove it; the little boy recited the details of an explosion in Jersey City, New Jersey, in which German saboteurs blew up an ammunition depot. He remembered, "The next thing I knew he was flying out the door and from the porch inviting all our neighbors to come over and hear his five-year old son read"—and he also remembered that these formative experiences as a news consumer produced in him "an uneasy feeling of a world outside my own."

Two years later, and Monmouth, Illinois, the family's next little town: the awful flu epidemic of 1918, quarantined neighborhoods, shuttered churches, masked townspeople, wreaths with black ribbons guarding doorways. His mother almost died. "The house grew quiet," he recalled, "and I sat watching for the guy with the black bag, and when he came down Jack went outside with him and I waited with a lurking terror for him to come back.... I went to bed and woke up with a weight digging at the pit of my stomach until one day Jack said 'she's going to be all right,' and his face looked like the sun was out." Then came the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918—Armistice Day. Glorious parades where "the streets suddenly filled up with people, bonfires were lighted, and grown-ups and children paraded down the street signing and carrying torches in the air." Then Ronald Reagan came down with bronchial pneumonia—he was so close to death, he says, the entire neighborhood came by to keep vigil. One boy brought him a collection of lead soldiers to play with: "the sun shone through the window," he recalled, "and I felt like a king with an army of 500."

Many stories index an unmistakable loneliness. In one, wandering on his own, he discovered in an unused hayloft a collection of artfully preserved birds' nests and eggs and glass-encased butterflies. He began scampering up trees, collecting eggs, punching tiny holes in both ends and blowing out the inside. The story ends in a family communion: his father scavenged an old display case from the shoe store where he worked, then hauled it up to the hayloft, his boy's new playpen. Reagan, too, found kindly old benefactors: a childless couple who lent the boy the use of their overstuffed gargoyle of a parlor chair, from whence he contemplated a "mystic atmosphere" of fragrant leather tomes and shawls and antimacassars and glass globes encasing exotic birds and flowers, and read all the latest grown-up magazines. "Aunt Emma and Uncle Jim" kept a jewelry shop next door to his father's shoe store; their basement seduced him with its clanging and ticking and shining treasures. They gave him cookies and chocolate and a ten-cent weekly allowance.

THE STORIES HE TOLD TELL A STORY IN THEMSELVES. THEY FREQUENTLY feature great, melodramatic traumas: the sinking of a great ship, a saboteur's explosion, a near explosion in the family flat. Almost always, they end in some sort of redemption—even if redemption is a paternal "licking," justly administered. Even those stories from the cruel winter of

1918 resolve into glorious celestial images: "the sun shone through the window"; "his face looked like the sun was out"—as if his mother's almost dying and himself almost dying were the best things that could have happened to him.

When he was ten the family moved to Dixon, Illinois—the river town where, though the family lived in five separate rented houses there, he finally began to feel at home. Dixon stories fixate about how he was the smallest kid in his age group—which sets the stage for his redemptions. Ice-skating on the frozen Rock River, he would turn his too-big overcoat, handed down from his big brother, into a sail, letting the wind carry his tiny body for miles. Playing football as a kid, "a scrawny, undersized, underweight nuisance," he frequently found himself on the bottom of a "mass of writhing, shouting bodies." That "gave me my first taste of claustrophobia. I got frightened to the point of hysteria." He taught himself to "time my charges so that I was in one of the upper layers of bodies." Toughened up, "I had a collection of the largest purplish bruises possible. More than once, I must have been a walking coagulation.... Those were the happiest times of my life."

Panic attacks, a mass of scar tissue: the happiest time of his life.

A downtown merchant displayed mannequins wearing the uniforms of the high school football team the Dixon Dukes, whom Dutch watched practice every day. "Filling one of those purple and white jerseys became the noblest and most glamorous goal in my life." He was too small to make the team. But that, too, was opportunity for redemption. He was spurred to take his first job, digging foundations for houses, which, he said, was the way he built up enough muscle to finally win a place on the squad.

A good thing he was scrawny, or he would never have acquired the character it took to be strong.

Everything always works out in the end, gloriously.

Why?

"WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES," A WISE WOMAN NAMED JOAN DIDION once said, "in order to live." It is how we organize the chaos of experience into the order we require just to carry on. And in the life of the young Ronald Wilson Reagan, there was more than the usual ration of chaos to organize. One biographer recites the catalogue: "Between the ages of six and ten he attended a different school every year.... As a baby he lived in his first house for four months and his second for eight. He lived in five different places in Dixon, four different ones in Tampico, two in Galesburg—all rented. Sometimes they subleased to pay their own rent." Another biographer reasonably points out, "At any given spot, he could have easily forgotten his address."

Much later, Ronald Reagan had an explanation—a story—that let him find comfort in the itinerancy: that his father, uneducated but street-smart, a natural-born salesman "endowed with the gift of blarney and the charm of a leprechaun," was searching out upward mobility for his family. It was a token of his Americanism, even a sort of cowboy heroism: "Like a lot of Americans whose roots were on the nineteenth-century frontier, he was restless, always ready to pull up stakes and move on in search of a better life for himself and his family."

In fact most of Jack Reagan's moves were lateral—and few if any, evidence suggests, were voluntary. Jack Reagan was an alcoholic. When the family left Chicago, it was after an arrest for public drunkenness. "Details of the incident are unknown," Jack's grandson Ron Reagan discovered, "but it resulted in his losing his new job." With the passage of Prohibition five years later, it wasn't just public drunkenness that might result in arrest; possessing alcohol was a federal crime. Jack Reagan would nonetheless disappear for days at a time, apparently going back to Chicago—where deaths due to alcohol increased by 200 percent in the first three years of the Volstead Act, and "psychosis has supplanted the old delirium tremens," the Associated Press reported, owing to the proliferation of unfermented liquor cut with fuel oil. Jack's older brother was committed to the Dixon State Hospital for the Feeble Minded for just such alcoholic psychosis in 1920.

Jack Reagan was also something of a dandy, specializing in the somewhat disreputable trade of selling women's shoes (what kind of man handled women's feet for a living?). He was glad-handing and blarneyful ("Jesus walked barefoot, but then he didn't have to deal with our Illinois winters, now did he?" "I'm glad you chose that pair, they can walk to church and dance a jig on the way home"), and claimed expertise in the made-up science of "proctipedics"—which he learned from a correspondence course advertised in the newspapers. His wife, however, was a teetotaler—a pillar of the Disciples of Christ church in every town in which they alighted. Her calling card was her devotion to fixing others, as she wrote in a sonnet she presented to her adult Sunday school class:

To higher, nobler things my mind is bent
Thus giving of my strength, which God has lent.
I strive some needy souls' unrest to soothe
Lest they the path of righteousness shall lose
Through fault of mine, my Maker to present.

If I should fail to show them of their need,
How could I hope to meet Him, face to face.

Needy souls were everywhere. Nelle Reagan considered it her duty to rescue each and every one of them. She was forever leaving the family hearth to pray with the families of sick children, to visit tuberculosis patients (though the disease, communicable through the air, took both Jack's parents within a week of each other when Jack was sick). She visited the local jail, entertaining prisoners with dramatic readings and hymns, accompanying herself on banjo or mandolin, preaching from the Bible, feeding them apples and cookies while bringing a modest lunch of soda crackers for herself. She developed a reputation for literal miracles. "Many of us," a contemporary recalled, "believed Nelle Reagan had the gift to heal.... It was the way she prayed, down on her knees, eyes raised up and speaking like she knew God personally, like she had had lots of dealings with him before." One local mother went to church to pray for her four-year-old daughter after doctors pronounced her case hopeless. Christians must accept death, the pastor told her. Mrs. Reagan, though, spent the afternoon with the family praying for a miracle. Moments later, the mother testified, "the abscess burst.... the next morning the doctor said, 'I don't need to lance this.' God had heard Nelle Reagan's prayer and answered it."

But there was one person she never could heal: her own alcoholic husband.

In Dixon, the family became relatively more settled, moving less often. But if anything the household was apparently more chaotic. Nelle began taking custody of released prisoners, housing them in her sewing room, calling them "her boys." (Her own boys, meanwhile, slept two to a bed.) One hagiographic biography of Ronald Reagan calls her "an extraordinary woman who appears to have possessed only positive traits." A more skeptical observer described the constantly absent Nelle's household as "a surreal Norman Rockwell painting with his alcoholic Catholic father, devout Christian mother, Catholic brother, and ever-changing boarders the family took in."

Nelle also loved to perform. Small-town newspapers like the *Dixon Telegraph* being organs for busybodies, we can follow her progress. In 1922, at Dixon State Hospital, she "entertained the patients with a short and enjoyable program"; in 1924 she played two roles in *The Pill Bottle*, "a delightful portrayal of missionary work"; in 1926 she was a guest at a Baptist church for a recitation titled "Ship of Faith"; in 1927 at the American Legion for a "splendid talk" on George Washington's boyhood. “FELLOWS HOME SCENE OF HAPPY MEETING,” Dixonians learned of an April 27, 1927, party she hosted on the status of Christianity in Japan; “MRS. J. E. REAGAN IS HOSTESS TO SOCIETY,” they read four months later of her presentation on “The Large World—My Neighborhood,” where she entertained “questions regarding the newspapers, moving pictures, radio, steamship and airplane, and how they tie the world together.”

Another sort of item, however, frequently appeared cheek by jowl with the social notes in small-town newspapers: shaming accounts of men arrested for drunkenness. “DIPSOMANIAC AND KLEPTOMANIAC IS THE DOUBLE AFFLICTION OF POOR FRED WEST.” “MAN WHO VIOLATED PAROLE WILL HAVE TO TAKE TREATMENT FOR BOOZE APPETITE.” “SON APPEARS BEFORE JUSTICE ASKING FOR PARENT’S COMMITMENT TO HOSPITAL.” Jack Reagan apparently never showed up in such hometown newspaper accounts, by what miracle we do not know. Maybe it had something to do with the peripatetic manner in which he practiced his affliction. Perhaps it helped that he was a regular pinochle partner of Dixon’s police chief. Maybe editors exercised deference to his teetotaling church lady wife; one of the distinguishing features of Prohibition was its selective local enforcement as a way to exert social control against disreputable outsiders. Or maybe it was just luck. Either way, the anxious uncertainty of life in the Reagan household had to have been awful. Fulton, Tampico, Chicago, Galesburg, Tampico again, Dixon: the next town over the horizon just might bring the family redemption. Or it might bring burning shame. Disorder, futility, and alienation were keynotes of Ronald Reagan’s formative years. It is hardly a wonder that a bright and frightened child might organize his recollections otherwise.

Take the story of the “oatmeal meat.” His older brother, who grew up an unsentimental man, once told a historian of his Saturday chore when the family lived in Chicago: he was sent to the butcher with instructions to buy a ten-cent soup bone to last the week. He was also to ask for a free chunk of liver for the cat. The punch line: “We didn’t have a cat.” The liver was the family’s big Sabbath meal. When Ronald Reagan recollected his family’s mealtimes, however, he told the story rather differently. “Our main meal,” he wrote in *An American Life*, “frequently consisted of a dish my mother called ‘oatmeal meat.’ She’d cook a batch of oatmeal and mix it with hamburger. . . . It was moist and meaty, the most wonderful thing I’d ever eaten.”

Maybe it was. Probably it wasn’t. As an adult, when asked to name his favorite food, Ronald Reagan always said steak. In his speeches, a juicy T-bone always stood for the height of sensual delight—as well as the ill-gotten gains of welfare cheats. In a 1985 private letter to his former boss he fondly remembered the day when he was a lifeguard and they devoured four pounds of spareribs at the beach; another time he lovingly recalled getting a “rib facial” at his favorite restaurant when he was a radio personality in Des Moines, Iowa; indeed, what little primary evidence we have from his childhood suggests an obsession with meat. “I have 12 rabbits and am going to kill 3 and eat them,” he wrote in his earliest surviving letter, which continues in a chatty stream of consciousness until something sensual seems to monopolize his attention in mid-thought:

“well I will have to close,
“now Ronald Reagan
“PS.
“Smell that meat
“Ain’t it good.”

Ronald Reagan was an athlete of the imagination, a master at turning complexity and confusion and doubt into simplicity and stout-hearted certainty. Transforming his life, first in his own and then in others’ eyes, into a model of frictionless ease—and fashioning the world outside him into a stage on which to display it—was how he managed to fly.

THE PROCESS SEEMED TO HAPPEN WITH A SUDDENNESS, IN THE TWO INtense years after the family moved to Dixon when he was ten, in 1921. An inner transformation appeared to have taken place—the act of will that turned Ronald Reagan into what he was to become. The evidence is recorded in the photographs.

There is a picture of Ronald Reagan from the summer when he was ten, a group shot of the caddies for a ladies’ golf tournament in Dixon. Moon Reagan is front and center, posed jauntily with a golf bag beside him, looking confidently into the camera. Dutch is awkwardly off to one side as if eager to escape the frame. Most of the boys are hatless, though some wear those sporty 1920s newsboy caps. Ronald, alone, is covered by a dweebish beanie. He looks distant, hardly present. He looks like the kind of boy he actually was: lonely and a little bit scared, the figure described by one writer on chaotic families as the “Boy Who Disappears.” She writes of quiet and withdrawn children like these, “Because they try so hard to stay invisible, they are often overlooked by people who might be able to help them.” The photograph fitted others’ recollections of him: that he was “subdued,” “shy and retiring”; that he would “sit for hours . . . looking at those glass-encased collections”; that “he was very quiet and he could go for hours all by himself playing with lead soldiers.”

There is another group photo including Ronald Reagan taken perhaps a year later. Again he is off to one side—but this time it is because he other boys serve as his retinue. Neil and Dutch have joined the new boys' marching band organized by the Dixon YMCA. All alone in his room he had been practicing baton twirling, just like what he had seen in the Armistice Day parade in Monmouth, with a broomstick or an old brass bedpost. And so the formerly timid boy was chosen drum major. Here he is the photograph's star—and he knows it. He proudly displays his gold-tipped staff and nifty striped tie—he's the only boy wearing one. His feet are precisely splayed, hip proudly forward; alone among the boys, he seems to understand that if you cock your elbow in just the right way, the cape that is part of their uniform juts out with jaunty flair instead of lying flat. And then there is the face: It is alive. It is the face of *Ronald Reagan.* He would never appear lost, forlorn, or empty-eyed in a photograph again. Try to find one.

There is a picture from when he is about twelve. Again he is with a group of fellow caddies—only this time, he sits, proudly, front row center. His eyes look almost steely. He seems to have carefully posed himself: legs splayed, fashionable basketball sneakers out front, fist out in his chin. He seems, in fact, as aware of the lines his body presents before the viewer as a dancer.

He had just started wearing spectacles. He told that story, like all the others, in tones of melodramatic redemption. He had been the last boy picked for baseball games: "The whole world was made up of colored blobs that became distinct when I got closer—and I was sure it appeared the same way to everyone else." (Being the Boy Who Disappears, he made no demand on his parents' attention by pointing out something was wrong.) Then, once upon a time, the family was out for a drive in the country and he put on his mother's spectacles as a lark and let out a "yelp that almost caused Jack to run off the road." He had healed himself; he could see.

But he is not wearing his glasses in that second golf course photo—even though you would think glasses are a tool that would come in handy for a caddy. Until the day Ronald Reagan died, in fact, he was almost never photographed wearing glasses. Here was a constant: if a camera was present, or an audience, he was aware of it—aware, always, of the gaze of others: reflecting on it, adjusting himself to it, inviting it. Modeling himself, in his mind's eye, according to how he presented himself physically to others. Adjusting himself to be seen as he wished others to see him—until the figure he cut became unmistakable. So unmistakable that in a caricature he drew of himself in his high school

yearbook, he presents himself in silhouette—and yet he is immediately recognizable to us, even now, as *Ronald Reagan.*

What happened, in those few years between the two pictures of himself as a caddy: the one of a distant, shy boy, the other of a boy presenting himself with the confidence of a hero? Here the evidence is suggested in a story that Reagan recalled in a moment of rare vulnerability—for which he slipped into a distancing third person address. Up until about that age of ten, he said, he used to make up plays in his head and act them out to himself, out loud—until people started making fun of him: "What are you doing, kid? Talking to yourself?" He wrote: "Enough cracks like that, and a sensitive boy... begins to feel a little silly.... So from then on he doesn't pretend openly."

Instead, he started to pretend inside—a decision that coincides with a singular event he also recalled with striking specificity: being issued, on December 20, 1921, three weeks before his tenth birthday, Card No. 3695 the Dixon Public Library. He began checking out an average of two books a week, books of a very definite description.

Boys' adventure books of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries hewed to rigid genre conventions. They almost always began in the same way: they introduce a boy or man who will soon be revealed as the story's hero, but outwardly does not appear heroic at all. The boys are fatherless or family-less, itinerant or otherwise without a place in the world. In one of young Reagan's favorites, the protagonist is the son of a man named Lord Greystoke, who is sent to deepest, darkest Africa to make an official investigation for the Crown. The elder Greystoke's ship wrecks, and he finds himself and his wife thrown "upon an unknown shore to be left to the mercies of savage beasts, and, possibly, still more savage men." His wife bears him a son, both the baby's parents pass away—and our hero has been introduced, as alienated from his circumstances as a human can possibly be: a man among beasts.

Tarzan of the Apes unfolds the essential lesson embodied in every adventure tale of the sort so assiduously devoured by this Boy Who Disappears: that some souls are born under the sign of grace, and that though it might not look so at first, this grace will always eventually show itself in the fullness of time, whatever temporarily chaotic and isolating accidents of circumstances into which the hero finds himself thrown.

Young Tarzan, at the age of ten—around the age Ronald Reagan was when he first encountered this story—is described to be as strong as a normal man of thirty. Belonging to neither the world of beasts nor that of men, he takes on the best qualities of both: a "quickness of mental action far beyond the power of the apes," yet able "to spring twenty feet across space at the dizzy heights of the forest tops." Deploying these gifts with the "indifferent ease that was habitual to him," he dispatches one by one the ignoble tyrant-apes who delight in rampaging against their weak and helpless subjects; protecting the weak, strong yet never flaunting strength, selflessly sacrificing—these are the qualities proper to a hero. Boy Tarzan, lonely and apart, turns out not to be inferior to those around him but, simply, to be *better.* Indeed, it turns out that the very circumstances of his alienation—"the training of his short lifetime among the fierce brutes of the jungle"—is the *superior* crucible for the shaping of heroes. This was a moral that a boy who hoped to escape degraded circumstances by wishing himself into heroism was exquisitely primed to appreciate. Here was a satisfying story of how the world worked. Or could be made to work in the mind of a lonely ten-year-old boy.

He read every Tarzan story he could get his hands on. When he found an adventure story he liked, he always read as many sequels as he could get his hands on. Stories by the former Unitarian minister Horatio Alger, for example, were even more useful—because in these the gift of grace was revealed not by dint of aristocratic blood but by its absence: unearned, aristocratic privilege is what villains use to lord over the weak, and the nobility of the *true* aristocrats—simple, stout-hearted boys of modest circumstance who rise by dint of honest hard work (and the sponsorship of a rich deus ex machina who always arrives in the nick of time when your heart is pure and you love your mother and protect her from the world's cruel imprecations)—reveals itself by turns via adventure after adventure, overcoming all setbacks, unto the very last page, when the final algebraic equation is magnificently, gloriously solved: "As for Frank, all goes smoothly with him. He is diligent in business, and is likely to become a rich man." Everything always works out in the end, gloriously.

We know exactly what kind of books Ronald Reagan loved as a boy because he told us, in details verifiable to anyone with a Dixon map: "I would make what to me was a long trek on foot in the evening after dinner—we called it supper then—down Hennepin Avenue past South Central School, up the hill and across the street to the library. I would usually take out two books. I made those trips at least once a week and sometimes more often . . . the Rover Boys; Frank Merriwell at Yale; Horatio Alger . . . all the Tarzan books . . . the other books that he wrote about John Carter and his frequent trips to the strange kingdoms to be found on the planet of Mars."

We also know a book he hated: *Brown of Harvard.* Its "hero" is an indolent Don Juan from "one of the oldest and best families in Cambridge," who aspires to be a poet and has "a handsome, almost careless countenance, and a wealth of curly hair which cropped up round about the edges of a woefully unsizeable cap." (That's a giveaway: a real hero, the sort Dutch Reagan preferred, carried himself exquisitely. Lord Greystoke has "features regular and strong; his carriage that of perfect, robust health"; Alger's Ragged Dick "had a frank, straight-forward manner"; another Alger hero "had a pleasant expression, and a bright, resolute look, a warm heart, and a clear intellect, and was probably, in spite of his poverty, the most popular boy in Groveton.") Reagan liked to contrast *Brown of Harvard* to *Frank Merriwell at Yale,* his hands-down favorite. It begins with Merriwell, a freshman of modest family background, finding himself challenged to a fight in which he accidentally shows up some entitled cad's actual ignobility. ("Barely had the words left the little referee's lips when—tap, tap, tap!—Merriwell had struck Diamond with three light blows with his open hand. . . . Never had they seen three blows delivered with such lightning-like rapidity.") It ends with a baseball game between Yale and the hated rival Harvard. The umpire hands the game ball "to the freshman pitcher Yale had so audaciously stacked up against Harvard," who skillfully holds Harvard to only two runs—then wins the game with two outs in the bottom of the ninth by cracking a soaring home run.

IN 1972, A LONG ISLAND ENTREPRENEUR ANNOUNCED A PLAN TO REPUBlish the Merriwell books as an antidote to what ailed America. "We need renewal and affirmation," he said, "and Frank offers it to us, for he is the democratic ethic in action." *Life* magazine ran a patronizing feature on the development, mocking this foolish man who "feels that the U.S.A. jumped the track and lost direction after the era of gaslight and cable car" and who held up a storybook hero as "the country's guide and measuring stick as national singularity is restored." Frank Merriwell, the suspicious circles agreed—master football player, tennis player, fencer, wrestler, sharpshooter, horseman, boxer, and oarsman, who once won the Congressional Medal of Honor by lifting his chaste sweetheart to the saddle of his galloping horse just before a speeding locomotive would have smashed her to smithereens—was ridiculous. So was this "shrewd enough fellow in other fields of endeavor" who was "willing to say he patterned himself after Merriwell when he was growing up, a poor boy."

Ronald Reagan would have disagreed. As a child, he had aspired to Merriwell's world—where virtue and villainy are always visible, revealed plainly in everyday performances (at least to those who also are virtuous; that is how good people recognize each other). Where good and evil are absolutes. Where the point of the story was that, though it might not look that way at the start, these truths became self-evident by the end—with plenty of adventure along the way. As an adult, Reagan unashamedly spoke of Frank Merriwell as a role model. Through Merriwell's world, he rehearsed what he wished to become, and began searching out ways to display it in the *real* world.

ONCE, WHEN RONALD REAGAN RAN FOR GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA, A political reporter asked him about his upbringing. He talked nonstop about his mother. He never even mentioned his father.

It could not have been difficult to cast Nelle Reagan within his emergent moral worldview: sweet but tough, stalwart but saintly, she was like all those mothers in his stories unto whom every sacrifice was due. Her philosophy fitted, too: she had, as Ronald Reagan put it, "a sense of optimism that ran as deep as the cosmos."

Shortly before he was born she was baptized into the Disciples of Christ, a Presbyterian splinter with elements of both liberalism and fundamentalism: a disdain for liquor but also an expansive role for women and reverence for education. Its rituals became a chaotic family's bedrock: Sunday school, then services, then "Christian Endeavor" club and a second evening service on the Sabbath; prayer meetings every Wednesday night; all manner of volunteer work through the week. Nelle became president of its Missionary Society. She was also always reading and rereading a book called *That Printer of Udell's: A Story of the Middle West*, a novel by a Disciples of Christ minister named Harold Wright Bell.

Out of curiosity, her eleven-year-old son picked it up himself. He found in it the same moral matrix of all his favorite books: indolent and hypocritical "gentlemen," a virtuous drifter whom they despise for his mean circumstances but who turns out to be far more noble than they, a chaste damsel to be rescued from defilement just in the nick of time—and, in the end, virtue rewarded, when the fatherless hero ends up as the town's first citizen. The only difference is the religious tincture: in this novel the strutting hypocrites are pillars of the church—until, that is, the hero melodramatically exposes their hypocrisy, introduces the community to the true meaning of faith, eliminates drunkenness and other species of loose morality from the town, and is rewarded by election as their representative in the United States Congress. All this for practicing the biblical injunction that is the volume's last words: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto Me."

It taught Dutch an important life lesson: Christians could be heroes, too, just like Frank Merriwell and Ragged Dick. A few days after reading it, Ronald Reagan went to his mother and told her he wanted to declare his faith and be baptized, too.

Church offered another attraction: an opportunity to perform. His mother was a ham. A neighbor described her voice, when calling her boys in for dinner, as "theatrical." The family never missed a "Chautauqua," the itinerant speaker series that toured Middle America; in Tampico, Jack and Nelle played in amateur theatricals at the opera house. She had changed her name from the apparently more prosaic "Nellie" to "Nelle"—what a friend called her "professional poetry-writing name"; in Dixon, she became one of the town's favorite "readers"—dramatic reciters of sentimental literature, a favorite parlor diversion of the time. Soon her second son started tagging along on her rounds (perhaps, since she was always off somewhere performing, and ministering, it started just as a way to spend time with her). In 1924 he acted in a Christmas play called *The King's Birthday*. Three weeks later, at the church annual meeting, he "convulsed the audience," the *Telegraph* reported, "with his one-act dramatic reading." That summer he traveled with his mother to Tampico. "Each number Mrs. Reagan gave was enthusiastically encored," a *Telegraph* reporter they apparently brought in tow recorded; "Ronald Reagan was encored several times." He was fourteen. The following Easter he led the entire packed sanctuary in the annual sunrise prayer. He began, a biographer wrote, to emulate Nelle's "mellow, distinctive voice, tinged with a hopeful cadence. When trying to be persuasive, he would lower the volume, speaking 'barely above a whisper' to win a confidential intimacy, and he instinctively knew just the right moments to raise that volume and lower the pitch for intensity."

The stories Ronald Reagan told about his father, meanwhile, are few, abbreviated, and cryptic. They suggest a mercurial, unpredictable presence, rushing, rushing, rushing, appearing out of nowhere to fill a space with his aggression: dashing in at the tail end of his wife's difficult labor; hurtling forth with news of the *Eastland* sinking. In one story Dutch is working at his job digging foundations when his father appears as the noon whistle blows. His son has just hoisted a pick in the air: "Without moving the pick another inch, I relaxed my wrists, opened my hands, walked out from under the pick, and headed toward Jack. The pick plunged to earth and stuck in the ground an inch or two from one of my bosses' toes. As Jack and I walked away together, he said: 'That was the damnedest exhibition of laziness I've ever seen in my life.'"

And there the tale ends—in admiration? Consternation? It's hard to tell.

In another, Jack catches Dutch fighting in the schoolyard, "surrounded by a circle of eggers-on. He stopped the fight, tongue-lashed the crowd—then lifted me a foot in the air with the flat side of his boot. 'Not because you were fighting,' he said, 'but because you weren't winning.'"

And there *that* story ends—though with an admixture of resentment: "That was my first sample of adult injustice. I *had* been winning."

The resentment resurfaces again in the curious tale of the rotten potatoes: "My father bought a carload of second-hand potatoes for personal speculation. My brother and I were ordered to the siding to sort the good potatoes from the bad." They spent days in that sweltering boxcar, "gingerly gripping tubers that dissolved in the fingers with a dripping squish, emitting an odor worse than that of a decaying corpse." Here Jack resembles nothing so much as the evil stepfather in the Horatio Alger book *Silas Snobden's Office Boy*, who shows up out of nowhere and barks, "I'm your father now, and I mean that you shall treat me as such. When do you get your pay?"

Her mother's beloved pastor died suddenly. Dutch made his replacement practically his surrogate father. He assures us that his actual father could occasionally show "great sensitivity"—like the time Moon's senior class decided to wear tuxedos for graduation, and Moon decided not to show up because the family could not afford one. Then Jack invites him on a walk. They end up at Mr. O'Malley's clothing store, where the haberdasher is waiting to fit him for a tux. It is telling that Moon, the family cynic, did not interpret the gesture as sensitive. He remembered it as Jack trying to save face in public. There is also the fact that sudden, extravagant acts of generosity are a frequent mark of alcoholic patriarchs, making up for equally extravagant failures.

There was little place for his father in Reagan's heroic scripts, except as a figure to be pitied. In fact, the most famous story he tells of his father feels like a scene straight out of a novel by Harold Wright Bell—whose own father had been an itinerant drunk, too. One day, Reagan related in the opening pages of the memoir he published in 1965, he "came home to find my father flat on his back on the front porch and no one there to lend a hand but me. He was drunk, dead to the world. I stood over him for a minute or two. I wanted to let myself into the house and go to bed and pretend he wasn't there. Oh, I wasn't ignorant of his weakness. I don't know at what age I knew what the occasional absences or the loud voices in the night meant, but up until now my mother, Nelle, or my brother handled the situation and I was a child in bed with the privilege of pretending to sleep."

There follows the redemption:

"But sometime along the line to each of us, I suppose, must come the first moment of accepting responsibility. If we don't accept it (and some don't), then we must just grow older without quite growing up. . . . I bent over him, smelling the sharp odor of whiskey from the speakeasy. I got a fistful of his overcoat. Opening the door, I managed to drag him inside and get him to bed."

Then, the happily-ever-after:

"In a few days he was the bluff-hearted man I knew and loved and will always remember."

A good thing his father was passed out drunk, or else Ronald Reagan would not have had the opportunity to come of age.

WHAT HAD LURED JACK TO DIXON IN THE FIRST PLACE WAS THE PROMISE of a partnership in a fancy new shoe store. "Mr. Reagan, who will act as manager, is an experienced shoe man and also a graduate practipedist," the *Telegraph* reported, adding an untruth no doubt provided by the story's subject, who "had years of experience in many of the larger cities throughout the state." (Galesburg, Monmouth, and Tampico were all smaller cities.) A historian who studied the terms of the partnership learned that the deal looked more like indentured servitude, in which he was to pay back his ownership share in commissions that always fell short of expectations.

Ronald Reagan would have to find his masculine role models elsewhere. Luckily, as adolescence dawned, a new mass medium was providing any number of real-life Frank Merriwells to emulate. Historians would call it the "Golden Age of Sport"—a time, as its bard, sportswriter Grantland Rice, put it, of "the greatest collection of stars that sport has ever known since the first cave man tackled the mammoth and the aurochs bull." In the 1920s, the number of people who paid to see college football games doubled (the stadium at Frank Merriwell's Yale held 75,000 fans). The biggest boxing matches were held in stadiums, including the grandest of them all: the "House That Ruth Built," Yankee Stadium, which opened with an audience of 74,217 when Dutch was twelve.

George Herman Ruth, he of the proliferating nicknames—"Babe," the "Bambino, "the "Sultan of Swat," the "Maharaja of Mash"—was a prototype for a new kind of cultural hero: hymned as so larger than life that the year he hit fifty-four home runs, one press-box Aeschylus called the feat "as incredible as the first heavier-than-air flying machine." Sports poetry became a regular feature in new magazines of mass circulation like *Collier's*, where Dutch could have read Grantland Rice's lyric about a farm boy who played for the nearby University of Illinois—

> *... which of them to tackle*
> *Each rival must decide;*
> *They shift with spectral swiftness*
> *Across the swarded range,*
> *And one of them's a shadow,*
> *And one of them is Grange.*

Writing like that was how the nation learned that what it was observing were not merely boys' games played by men but world-historic moral clashes revealing the moral secrets of the universe.

Boxing had been an outlaw sport until World War I, when the Army began using it for infantry training. Then the American Legion led a movement to lift state boxing bans as a patriotic duty and a young man who had grown up in hardscrabble mining camps (Babe Ruth had grown up in an orphanage, raised by monks) became champion by beating a fighter fifty-four pounds heavier than he in a fight the *New York Tribune* called the greatest bout "dating back to days beyond all memory." Jack Dempsey had hardly lost before 1926, when Gene Tunney felled him before eighty thousand fans at Yankee Stadium. "Honey, I forgot to duck," Dempsey told his wife—absurdly modest, just like a hero was supposed to be. The *Dixon Telegraph* had found the contest important enough to run three features on it in one day, not including a wire photograph rushed into the paper before press time captioned, "Tunney Starts Aggressive Attacks in the First Round." Ronald Reagan, who made the exact same quip about not ducking to *his* wife after a 1981 assassination attempt, was plainly paying attention.

Sports stars were intimations that actual fleshly human beings, not just storybook heroes, could become superhuman, too. Sportswriting encapsulated a moral vision—the same one Dutch imbibed in his adventure stories. The actual Babe Ruth once unloaded a sack of letters on a rookie with the instructions to "put the letters from the broads in one pile and the ones with the checks in the other. Throw the other junk away, especially the sappy stuff from fans." The mythic Babe Ruth "spent innumerable hours going out of his way to help youngsters singly and in groups, to take them autographed balls, to help pay their doctors' bills"—at least in the writing of Grantland Rice, who also wrote, "The true democracy in the United States is not to be found among politicians, our so-called statesmen, our labor union leaders or our capitalists. It is only to be found in sport. . . . Here you are measured by what you are and what you can do. Nothing else counts." It was sports, he said, more than war, "that help build up clean living, cool heads, stout hearts, and sound judgement under fire." The heroes it raised up proved it.

There were suspicious circles even then. Scolds at the *Saturday Evening Post* carped that in the reckoning of a writer like Rice, Babe Ruth could not just show up for a game in St. Louis but instead "arrived after the manner of a human avalanche hurtling on its downward way from the blue Missouri heavens." They argued that the reason for the hyperbole was commerce: "the sporting news must be played up as glorious and magnificent; the dull, the shoddy, the second-rate in sports must be left unsaid"; to write otherwise "might quench the inherent idealism in sports which is born and bred in every youngster in the United States. But most of all, it would discourage a potential customer." Hagiography was part of the hustle, wrote W. O. McGeehan of the *New York Herald Tribune*, who called boxing "the manly art of modified murder": "they raise false idols. They make heroes of brutes, they make demigods of inconsequential young men without character or true courage, they make saintly characters out of the vicious." And, said the young liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in the *Nation*, it could not last: "Heroes can thrive only where ignorance reduces history to mythology. They cannot survive the coldly critical temper of modern thought when it is functioning normally, nor can they be worshipped by a generation which has every facility for determining their foibles and analyzing their limitations."

The scolds lost the contest. Radio came; the first heavyweight championship was broadcast in 1921, the first World Series in 1922. And when Dempsey and Tunney fought their rematch in 1927, *Radio Digest* claimed Graham McNamee's broadcast caused 127 radio listeners to have heart attacks. The United Press tripled the size of its sports bureau; the average metropolitan newspaper carried two thousand inches of sports copy a week, twice the amount carried a decade earlier; and the *Chicago Tribune,* which circulated across the Midwest, ran a column called "My Most Thrilling Moment in Football"—every day.

More important, for a young man in Dixon, local newspapers described contests fought by local "nines" (baseball teams), "gridders" (football players), and "grapplers" (wrestlers) in the exact same melodramatic way—frequently on the front page. Small-town Midwestern boys could become terrestrial gods, too: Dutch learned that from the newspaper every single day.

His first surviving letter ("Smell that meat. Aint it good") is also the first surviving piece of his sportswriting: "Dixon High school has played 10 games won 8 tied 1 and lost 1 they tied sterling." He turned the discussion to Sunday School: "our class took the banners for attendance and collection"—"*took the banners*" is Golden Age sportswriting to a T—before turning back to football again, to a game that was canceled because "there captain got yellow" (sports even then for him was a test of character and mettle), and to a local boy named Garland Waggoner, son of his mother's beloved, recently deceased, pastor: "monday mom got a letter from Mrs. Waggoner and she said Garland has made the team at Eureka they played Illinois this week." Garland Waggoner became a football star at Eureka. And, at that, Dutch Reagan's hero.

Heroes were everywhere, every day, in a small-town Midwestern paper like the *Telegraph.* It was part of the culture of the 1920s—headlines like ROUND WORLD FLIERS RESUME FLIGHT TOMORROW; UNSUNG HEROES OF U.S. / BOYS IN POSTAL SERVICE FACE UNTOLD HARDSHIPS / BUT ARE NEVER RECOGNIZED IN HONORS; "HUMAN FLY" TO SCALE BANK BUILDING. Charles Lindbergh dipped a wing when he flew over town on the way to an appearance in Peoria.

Such news in the *Dixon Telegraph* ran beside evidence of a modern world that was becoming increasingly chaotic, confusing, unmoored: "PONZI LEAVES JAIL WITH ONE IDEA—TO ACCUMULATE ANOTHER FORTUNE." "GIRL BRANDED YOUTH WITH 'KKK' HE SAYS." "GEN. DAWES CONDEMNED LA FOLLETTE / 'UNTRIED AND DANGEROUS RADICALISM'—MAMMOTH CROWD." "FIENDISH SLAYER IS HEADING FOR CANADIAN BORDER." "Swooping down upon the East Davenport Turner Hall Tuesday, prohibition officers and a squad of local police seized more than 4,000 pints of beer, which was dumped."

Thank God for the glory of sport. How deeply did the canons of sports heroics inform Ronald Reagan's inner transformation? His son Ron once told a story about his father's last days, when he could look back at a life in which he had become, by any reasonable reckoning, precisely the kind of man he had dreamed of: first a movie star adored by millions; then the most powerful man in the world, the slayer of evil empires. Weakened by Alzheimer's disease, his mind reduced to its most primal constituents, he would wake with a start and cry that there was somewhere he needed to be: not a movie set where Bette Davis or George Cukor was waiting for him, nor the White House Situation Room, but a locker room. "There's a game," he would murmur; "they're waiting for me."

He was always a strong swimmer, and in the spring of 1926 he and Jack talked the operators of the local beach on the Rock River into hiring him as a lifeguard, even though he was only fifteen. He told the stories again and again: how he was hired at Lowell Park at eighteen dollars a week (fifteen in other tellings) and all the hamburgers he could eat; how he selflessly guarded the treacherous waters twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for the next seven summers; how his exploits soon proved so heroic that his boss (or in other versions, his father) provided him with an old tree stump in which to carve notches memorializing each life he saved—"the notches multiplied, and the log soon began to look like a flock of woodpeckers had chipped away at it." "I guess you were notches one, two, and three on my log," he wrote to a Dixon friend decades later. In 1986, at an Oval Office photo opportunity with the president of the U.S. Lifesaving Association, he told how, one time during college when he went back to the beach to visit with his replacement, he was asked to watch the water while the other man went to the bathroom: "Would you believe I had to go in and make a rescue while he was gone?" He also loosed himself from his religious obligations—beach, not church, was his Sunday duty now.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, right around this time, defined "personality" as "an unbroken series of successful gestures." This named the accomplishment Dutch Reagan began displaying once summer was over, in high school. A new English teacher came to town, J. B. Frazer, who graded compositions not just for spelling and grammar but for imaginative liveliness. "Before long," Reagan wrote, "he was asking me to read some of my essays to the class, and when I started getting a few laughs, I began writing with the intention of entertaining the class. I got more laughs and realized I enjoyed it as much as I had those readings at church. For a teenager still carrying around some old feelings of insecurity, the reaction of my classmates was more music to my ears." Frazer also turned their lowly school into a theater powerhouse. And with his newfound confidence, Ronald Reagan discovered another avocation. By his senior year he never missed the chance to perform—usually star—in the productions. He had a way, a classmate remembered, of "sauntering across the stage," drawing attention to himself "even when he was not speaking."

Frazer saw in Dutch a natural leader, "endowed with a curious, keen, and retentive mind." He also admired Reagan's "very unusual mother," who "had that rare ability to make the ideal and fine seem quite practical to others," and noticed Dutch revealing the same talent. Frazer, who soon became the latest in a series of Reagan's surrogate fathers, also noticed another emerging trait: the intensity of his longing to be someone else. "He wanted to live the character. He didn't just want to parrot the lines."

Then summer, and his next season at the lifeguard stand. "You know why I had so much fun at it?" he said in one of his first big Hollywood fan magazine features. "It was like a stage. A lot of people had to look at me." He brought his windup Victrola to work and imitated the play-by-play calls of exciting recent sports matches, recalled with photographic memory. The lifeguard stand was also his director's chair. When he wanted to clear the water before closing time to leave for a date, he'd wait until no one was looking—always aware of others' gaze—and skip a rock across the water: "Oh, that's just an old river rat," he would say loudly, and watch the swimmers clear out. When action was lulled he might demonstrate one of his famous swan dives, or offer comic relief by waddling like a chimp. He took a shine to a local beauty, and when she spurned him, he landed the pretty daughter of the new preacher instead. (There's a photograph of him in his dashing lifeguard singlet, goofing with Margaret "Mugs" Cleaver, his hand resting dangerously low on her hip.)

Then, a thrashing in the distance—and lo, there was Dutch, flinging off his glasses, making another save.

He later expressed resentment of swimmers who downgraded his heroics, particularly the strapping young farm boys who "rarely encounter water deeper than an irrigation canal and would invariably underestimate the river's power." He recalled them saying, "Y'know, I was just fine out there—didn't really need your help." "I'd just nod," he reported himself responding, "and keeping carving my notch.'" (The hero must always be modest.)

He crafted a sort of prose poem on his own heroics for his high school annual. "Meditations of a Lifeguard" is a token of how effortlessly his mind swirled fiction and fantasy into soul-satisfying confections with himself at the center of the world. He sets the scene—"A mob of water-seeking humans intent on giving the beach guard something to worry about"—then grants the lifeguard-narrator the power to author reality itself: he is the one who "paints the ether a hazy blue, by the use of lurid, vivid, flaming adjectives." He offers a taxonomy of the lesser beings in his charge: a "big hippopotamus with a sandwich in each hand, and some firewater tanked away"; a " 'frail and forty' maiden"; boys distractedly enacting adventure stories. He saves them, one by one—and concludes with the effortless wooing of a passing lovely: "She speaks and the sound of her voice is like balm to a wounded soul, the worried expression fades in the glow of a joyous realization, the birdies strike up in chorus, and somewhere celestial music plays the haunting strains recognizable as 'The End of a Perfect Day.'"

A perfect day: it revolved around himself, the rescuer, surrounded by those just waiting to be rescued, a grateful public he could superintend with perfect command.

His rescues became a staple in the *Telegraph:* the daring nighttime save in which Dutch arrived just in the nick of time after "[o]ne of the members of the party who was said to have attempted to rescue him was forced to abandon the attempt when he too was in danger of being taken down"; the arrogant stranger who was "warned repeatedly against entering deep water and responded by cursing the guard. He sank in the deep water and after a struggle Reagan succeeded in rescuing him." The accounts, however, read as suspiciously tidy to at least one historian, who wonders whether Reagan didn't also have a hand in drafting them. Some in his community were suspicious, too—how convenient that people always managed to almost drown themselves whenever young Reagan was around, and how annoying that he never seemed to shut up about it. His senior yearbook featured a comic dialogue on the subject:

"Drowning Youth—Don't rescue me. I want to die.

"Dutch Reagan—Well, you'll have to postpone that: I want a medal."

Football, however, not swimming, was the Golden Age's sacred sport. The year Reagan entered high school, Grantland Rice enumerated the qualities it inculcated: "Condition, courage, stamina, loyalty, service, team play, fortitude, and skill. There has been no finer game yet devised for the youth of any country." It was also Ronald Reagan's favorite sport. When he was president, he called it "a kind of clean hatred," a downright necessary invention: "the last thing left in civilization where two men can literally fling themselves bodily at one another in combat and not be at war." He described spending countless afternoons looking out on the high school playing field from an earthen ledge in his family's yard, "watching and hearing the clash of padded bodies butting up against one another and dreaming of the day when I could put on a uniform and join the combat." When that day came, he was so tiny the coach could hardly find a practice uniform for him—and he couldn't make the team.

What would a boy in an adventure story do?

Pull himself up by his own bootstraps—for anything was possible for he who was born under the sign of grace, grace that will always eventually reveal itself in the fullness of time, whatever temporarily degraded accident of circumstance into which he finds himself thrown. Degraded circumstance, after all, is the superior crucible for the shaping of heroes. That was the summer he took the job digging foundations for houses. "It was midseason of that third year when it happened," as he spun the tale. "I found myself learning plays at guard among my heroes. All week long I figured it was being used to discipline or scare the regular guard into more effort. I can never describe the feeling on the following Saturday when I heard the coach in that impressive pre-game locker room hush come to right guard in the starting lineup. His next word was 'Reagan.'

"I had a good day—particularly on defense—and there I was at last, and for the rest of the season, a 'regular.'" (Reagan's youngest son recalls his father once telling him, "It's funny, whenever I think of playing football back then, it's always a gray, cloudy day"—more melodramatic that way.)

Sport, that manly testing ground of character—where, "R.R. '28" wrote in another prose poem in his senior high school annual, "all the soul is laid bare." This particular piece began with a reference from Scripture: "To every man comes Gethsemane!" Gethsemane was the garden where Jesus prayed alongside his disciples for the courage to face his greatest test, crucifixion; where Christ taught that though the spirit was willing, the flesh might be weak. Such tests could also come, Dutch Reagan insisted, "on the level sward in the shadow of a deserted grandstand." He told the story of a high school football star, "a storybook type, tall, good looking, and very popular," who selfishly stopped trying after his team stopped winning games. In one contest he faked an injury rather than come back for the second half and "risk his brilliant reputation by being flopped for losses." The team lost a game it should have won. And so, on the sixth day, he revisited the scene of his shame. "An early harvest moon made ghostly figures of the milky mist tendrils that hung over the deserted gridiron like spirits of long dead heroes." Those spirits were "pointing ghostly scornful fingers at him. The quitter cringed before the visions his tortured mind brought up." He "saw for the first time how cheap he really was. Great sobs shook him and he

writhed before the pitiless conscience that drove him on in his agony of self-punishment."

Then, from temporarily degraded circumstances, redemption: "his sobs ceased and he stood up, his face to the sky, and the ghosts of honored warriors urged him and drew him from the low shadows. A love and loyalty took the place of egoism. His hand strayed to the purple monogram he wore"—purple and white were the Dixon school colors—"and as he looked at the curving track, at the level field, he realized he loved them." The next game, his team once again behind at the half, our hero "rose and spoke." (*Christ has died. Christ has risen.*) "In three minutes the team trotted out to warm up, and eleven boys were wiping tears from their eyes as the quitter took his place by the full-back."

The tale closely resembled something by Grantland Rice—whom the author honors in the story's final line, quoting Rice's most famous poem: "It matters not that you won or lost, but how you played the game." Like the Galloping Ghost, Red Grange, our hero soared "in a ground-gaining stride that made the coach want to recite poetry"; "he sailed, and as he side-stepped a man . . . his bird-like flight changed to a ripping, tearing smash." He scored two touchdowns and was borne off the field on his teammates' shoulders.

In the story, for a brief and unbearable moment, the hero is racked by a complex moral ambivalence (ordinary mortals, after all, sometimes selfishly take time off when they're having a tough day). Then his soul is restored to coherence by the plain act of deciding simple grace resides within reach of his own simple decision—just as R.R. '28 says you're supposed to in another of his yearbook texts, a poem titled "Life": "I wonder what it's all about, and why / We suffer so, when little things go wrong? / We make our life a struggle, / When life should be a song." It revealed his personal liturgy of willed self-confidence. He had become a virtuoso of self-confidence, a maestro at *staging ways to display* his self-confidence. The performances gave him an outward glow. People began to follow him, envy him: they doubted, hesitated, feared; he did not. He graduated from high school transformed: thirty notches carved in his lifeguard log; beau of the town's prettiest girl (he won her away from the quarterback); dashing leading man; yearbook art director (perhaps it was he who came up with the idea to give the book a Hollywood theme, listing the editorial staff as "PRODUCERS"); fashion trendsetter (among the school year's highlights, the *Dixonian* includes December 19: "Derbies appear. Ronald Reagan enters with corduroy and high cuts"; in his picture he sports an ascot where the rest of the seniors wear long ties); vice president of the new Hi-Y club (chartered "to create, maintain, and extend throughout the school and community, the highest standards of Christian character"); "Heap Big Chief" of the junior-senior banquet (it featured an Indian theme); senior class president. "Life is just one grand sweet song, so start the music," he published as his yearbook quote.

"He always left people with a way of saying 'God bless you,'" a classmate recalled, "that made them feel—just maybe—he had an inside track." Some began seeing him as a figure of destiny.

IN RONALD REAGAN'S CHAOTIC CHILDHOOD THE IMAGINATION WAS armor. There is nothing unusual about that; transcending the doubts, hesitations, and fears swirling around you by casting yourself internally as the hero of your own adventure story is a characteristic psychic defense mechanism of the Boy Who Disappears. He pushes doubt and confusion from the forefront of his consciousness with the furious energy of a boy who fears that if he does not do so he might somehow be consumed.

The strategy can backfire, however, when the boy becomes a man and must finally face the austere everyday ambivalence and incoherence of the adult world. The long-delayed realization that one's fantasies do not actually map reality can leave behind a wrecked grown-up more alienated, helpless, and terrified than he ever was before. Which is why most people, with greater or lesser degrees of success, simply grow out of it.

But Ronald Reagan was not like the rest of us. He was, in this particular sense, a much, much stronger man. Perhaps it was that he worked out in the psychic gymnasium of boyhood fantasy with ten times the furious determination of an ordinary boy. Perhaps it was a more mysterious gift. However the outcome was achieved, it's not a controversial point to make: at turning complexity and confusion and doubt into simplicity and stout-heartedness and certainty, Ronald Reagan's power was simply awesome. As an athlete of the imagination, he was a Babe Ruth, a Jack Dempsey, a Red Grange.

The real-world consequences of his chaotic upbringing hardly ever went away; he was presented with them constantly. And yet that awful reckoning the world forces upon those who retreat into fantasy, in order to deny complexity, never seemed to have forced itself upon him; his armor was just that strong. "There's a wall around him," as his wife Nancy put it. "He lets me come closer than anyone else, but there are times when even I feel that barrier."

It was the stories: the ones he told himself, the ones he told others, the ones born of heroic situations that he always was scanning the horizon to put himself at the center of, to prove to himself the world was always in actuality the way he preferred it to be. It was his greatest political skill. "*Looking back my memory is very vivid*"; "*I shall always remember*"; "*fresh in my memory*": phrases like these saturate his recollections. They seem to do so in inverse proportion to the actual power of his recall. The gap between the one and the other was the measure of how he made himself, and others, feel good.

And by 1973, beginning his seventh year as governor of California, with two years to go in his term, in the season of Operation Homecoming, he had hardly changed in his essential being. And he was thinking about running for president.